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ON THE DES MOINES

JAMES CLOYD BOWMAN

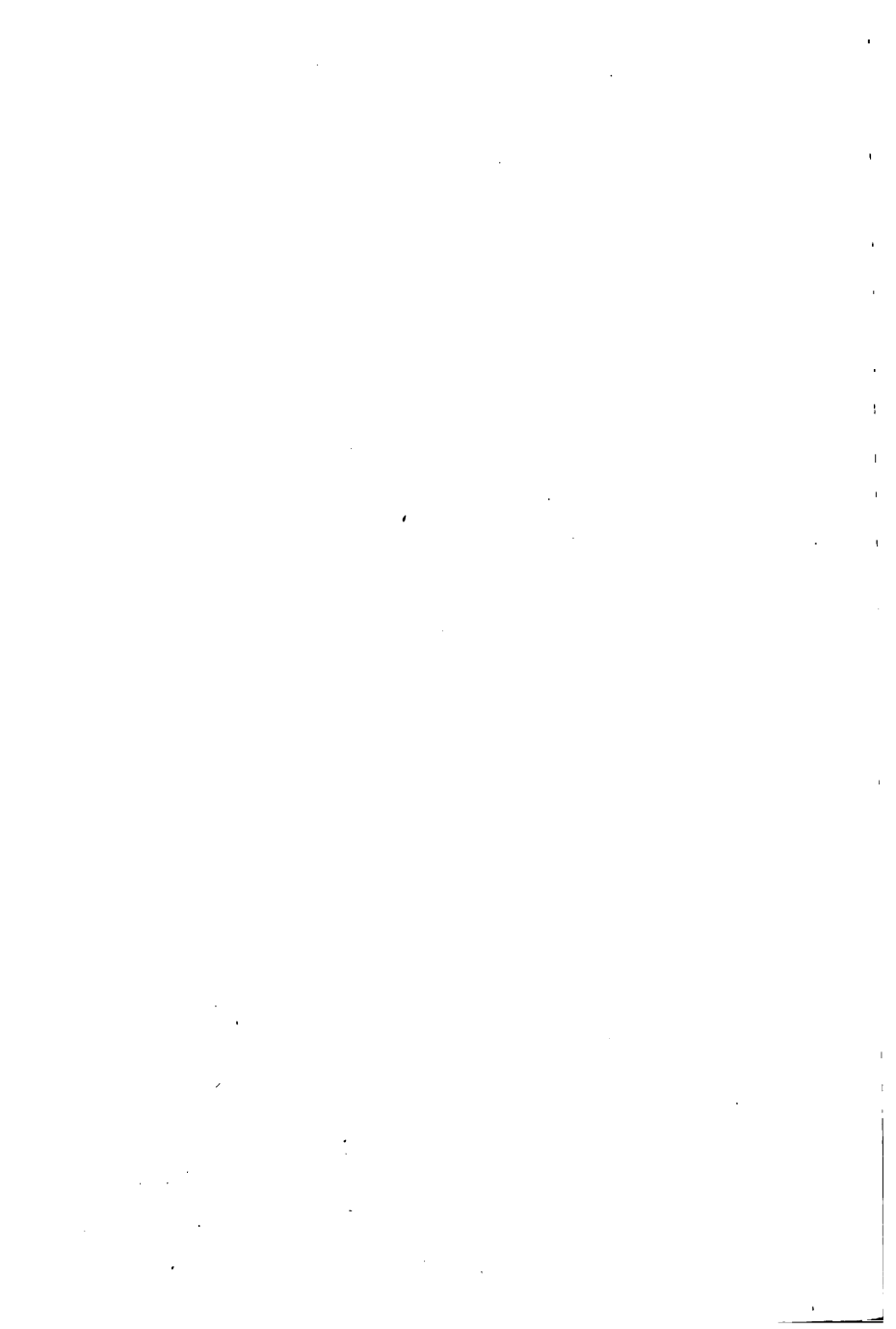
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ON THE DES MOINES

On the Des Moines

JAMES CLOYD BOWMAN



THE CORNHILL COMPANY
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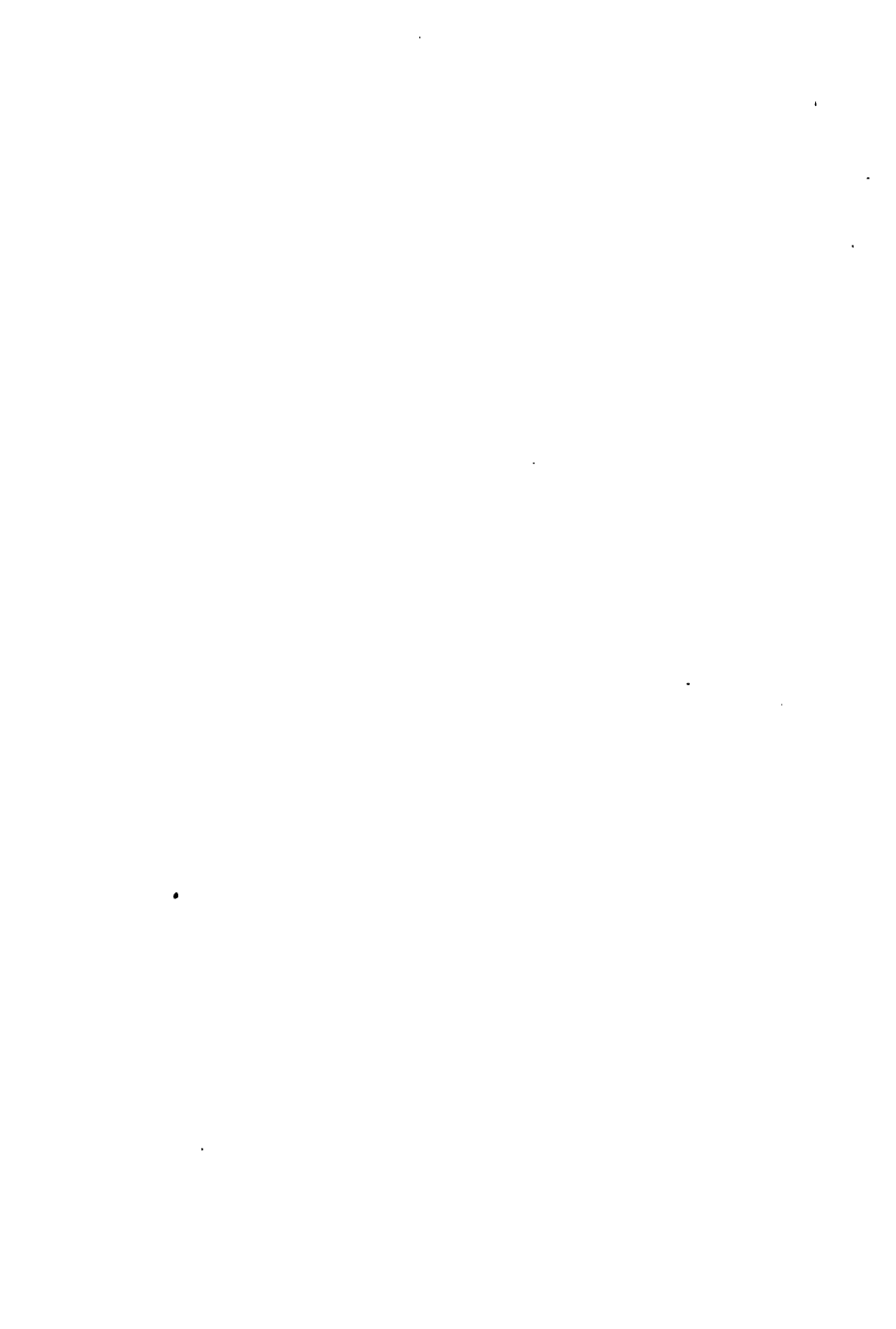
To Hamlin Garland

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ON THE DES MOINES



On the Des Moines

I

I BECOME A FISHERMAN

Everything comes at last to the river,—
The trees let down their roots into it,
And lift it to feed their branches;
The fishes make of it
Their habitation and their home;
The birds bathe in it,
And sing to it,
Both in the morning and in the evening;
The beasts drink of it,
And dream along its marge;
Men come down to it from the world,
They loiter beside its pools,
They find food
For the soul that is within them;
The hills themselves creep down into it
Through silent centuries,—
Ay, everything comes at last to the living river.
I come down to the river
To find my life;
I spread my lodge,
With the bluegrass for a carpet
And the scrub oaks for a canopy,

ON THE DES MOINES

By the side of the singing water.
I have dwelt too much with the world,
I have fed too greedily upon society,
I have chewed the dry husks of reputation
Far too long,
I have shared
The empty frivolity of many men,
I have forgotten my own being
Until it smells of mildew,
I have been saying to my life
These many days,
You are of less worth
Than the gaudy trinkets
The world flings its foolish children.
My life at last has become a rebellious boy,
It has led me down to the living water
Which is so like unto itself,
It bids me stop to consider,
It beckons me to a seat upon the sands
Where I may bathe,
Where I may wash away
The hectic fever of the world.
As I go
To my abode by the river
I carry with me my three best friends—
My Socrates,
My Jesus,
And my Walton.
From these have come

ON THE DES MOINES

The libraries of the world,
The inspiration of the countless multitudes.
These help me
To be thoughtful,
To be gracious,
To be quiet.
They teach me to understand
And to love
My fellowmen.
They give me a measure for my life
In its onward flow
Through freshet and drouth,
Everlastingly.
Strangely, as I unloose my shoe laces,
There falls from me first
My bustle and my ambition,
My self-seeking.
These float and mingle
With the froth and the foam
The water belches
After too rapid a running,
And with the bubbles they disappear.
I forget
The clatter and the din
That have unbalanced me,
The fitful world retreats far from me,
I poultice my brow with the cooling water,
It teaches me
To be quiet,

ON THE DES MOINES

To be at ease,
To find repose.
And next there falls from me
My old idolatrous worship
Of efficiency.
Constantly it has goaded me
With its measures for action,
With its yardstick,
Its foot-pound,
Its horse-power,
Until I have stumbled vacant-eyed
With exhaustion and anguish.
I begin to see things
That money cannot buy;
That within me
Which a carefully cultivated reputation
Has allowed to atrophy,
Which efficiency
Has failed to grasp in its steel fetters;
My judgment of the values of life,
The flowering of my own personality,
These awaken
From their slumber of many days.
I begin to comprehend
That from the wellsprings of the mind
Comes repose.
I continue to bathe
Along the shining sands:
The water kisses my entire body,

ON THE DES MOINES

It washes away
The fever that is within me.
There falls from me
My cupidity.
I have coveted almost everything
At one time or another,
Greatness,
Honor,
Power,
Sensationalism;
I have sought
What those around me have sought,
The ready-made pleasures
Which are sold for money;
I have neglected
What others have neglected,
The inner kingdom of the mind,
The peace of the understanding spirit;
And now I see
That I have been entirely foolish,
That I have wasted
In large part
The years of my life.
And after I have washed me,
I cast my hook into the water;
I become a fisherman.
The while I shift
To the smooth side of a rock,
And dangle my pole

ON THE DES MOINES

As sportsmanlike as I know.
The world comes by;
My fellowmen
One by one
Sit at my elbow,
Discourse their half-knowledge;
I inquire if it bears wisdom.
I roll their sayings about in my mind
As a bovine rolls its cud
For a second chewing;
I study to find quiet,
To find simplicity of mind,
To find contentment.

II

MY RETIRED FARMER

Hardly have I begun to fish
When I hear the occasional ping of a rifle
Gradually drawing near.
Finally, there shuffles from the bushes
A lank, sad-featured man with empty, shriveled face.
"A pleasant morning," I venture.
"All mornings are alike—Catching many fish?"
"Mostly feeding them—
And fetching my bait from beneath the stone."
I add, suddenly condemning myself
To feel my hook caught on a snag.
"Why should so young a man as you waste time?"
"I am Methuselah in age when last he sickened."
"You are a fool or idiot, little matters which."
"Shooting many fish?" I query, shifting ground.
"None! mud turtles!"
"Why should so old a man as you waste time?"
His leathery face blanches,
His bullet eyes twitch,
His protruding Adam's apple gulps.
"It's a long story," he says wistfully.
"Here, occupy this rock, and talk,"
I half command as I turn the sharp side down.
A rheumatic pain catches him,
But he squats with a wry twitch about his mouth.

ON THE DES MOINES

"My father was a searcher after money from his birth.

He came West from New York State in the fifties
With his young wife.

Bad luck attended them;

They were forced to settle on the prairie

Beside the Des Moines River;

But California haunted my father to his dying day.

My mother silently endured a life of hardship and
deprivation;

She never questioned;

She died fifteen years ahead of father.

Well, father left me a half-section of Iowa land,

And the ambition to make fifty thousand dollars.

I never questioned

Father would have been happy had he made money.

I worked early and late,

Killed two faithful wives,

Left not a single heir—

Children are such a nuisance—

Added acre to acre, quarter-section to quarter-section,
Of Iowa land.

Finally the boom came;

I found myself worth seventy-five thousand dollars.

With my third wife, I decided to retire,

To enjoy what remained of life.

We moved to town,

Bought a house facing the river—

See, there goes a turtle!"

ON THE DES MOINES

Ping!

"I have fixed him:

Number nine hundred eighty-seven since the last
week in April."

He marks a heavy cross beside innumerable other
crosses

In his note book.

"I was always happy while at work,

Had I but known it.

I was adding, some years,

Three thousand dollars to my estate.

My appetite was good, my muscles supple;

I was an honest workman.—

My, what a deal of water has drained through the
river

Since I quit.

Look at me now:

I live on pills, beef broth, liniment,

And wither into decay.

When I retired what little happiness I had vanished.

I still get up at four-thirty,

Though there is nothing to do

But to find fault with everything.

Finally, things got so bad my wife drove me from the
house,

Said she refused to live longer with a polecat;

Unless I kept out of her sight during the day,

She threatened to divorce me.

ON THE DES MOINES

I sat from morning till evening beside the running water.

It nearly killed me;

I had never been quiet for so long a time in my life.

At last, I sent to Sears and Roebuck

For their best repeating rifle and ten thousand cartridges.

You see my inner works

Were never geared to enjoy things

That bring ordinary mortals pleasure.

No, I don't much like this sort of thing;

But I wanted to do something that would be of use;

And so I go up and down, day after day,

Shooting mud turtles."

I have not the heart to let him know

He is robbing the river of its needed scavengers.

"There goes another one," I announce.

Ping: the bullet cuts the turtle square in the eye.

"Number nine hundred eighty-eight

Since the last week in April,"

He mumbles in monotone as he shambles up the bank,

Marking another cross with his pencil.

Forgetful my hook is still fastened beneath the rock,

I listen a long time

To the occasional ping of the retreating rifle.

ON THE DES MOINES

III

MY FARM BOY

Another day, as I sit fishing,
And brooding over the running water
That never is aweary of its course, however tortuous,
There resounds the tramp of heavy boots
Over the shingly limestone.
Suddenly a bass voice bellows,
"Good place to fish?"
"Good fishing anywhere,"
I smile, without turning to view the stranger.
"Damn-me," the voice snorts,
"You sound like one o' those natural fishermen,
That live wholly for the sake
O' dawdling an idle pole over the water."
He slouches down beside me;
I become suddenly conscious
Of the neck and shoulders of a bull;
And the head—a cannon-ball;
And the features—a cratered no-man's land.
"I never could understand why a fisherman is a fisherman."
"Cannot be explained; it must be experienced;
An instinct, likely enough."
"Damn-me, I guess you are right;
Anyhow, I don't see why a man in his right mind
Will aggravate his back and arms

ON THE DES MOINES

A dozen hours together, over a pole,
When he can buy all the fish he can catch,
Dressed, mind you, at the store, for fifteen cents."
"That's human nature;
The more you think about it, the more you are perplexed.
But can you detail why you do not like to fish?
To me, fishing is so great a pleasure
I cannot understand why everyone should not enjoy it."
"Well, I can explain why I don't like it, right enough:
I like life, action, sensation;
None o' your monotonous graveyard drudgery o' holding a dead pole.
Give me a bunch o' cannon crackers
And a Fourth o' July celebration;
Give me a belly full o' pepper
And a seat on the band wagon in the circus parade;
Give me a keg o' beer and an unscrupulous wench."
"How about an eight-pound black bass
Snorting and pawing on the end of a line?"
"You fishermen have only one such experience in a lifetime;
I should want a bass every hour,
And each succeeding one would need to be larger.
You see I'm dead opposed to everything that smells o' work:
I'm the most unfortunate cuss in the world, too.
Dad, you see, has got two sections o' Iowa land.

ON THE DES MOINES

I've been waiting ten years for him to die;
And still he's in the best o' health,
Likely to live, damn-me, nobody knows how long.
He threatens to leave his land to somebody else
If I don't stay home and work.
Damn-me, I hate the farm like poison:
Nothing to see, nothing to hear, absolutely no excitement,
Not even when the enraged bull breaks through the
barbed wire;
Not the least reason in the world
Why the collie's blind puppies
Shouldn't wait nine years before opening their eyes.
And all I get is fifty dollars a month.
And worst of all, twice a week,
I've got to come down to this stinking river,
To catch Dad a mess o' catfish.
Pleasure?
All the pleasure I get is twice a year
When Dad gives me ten days off:
Damn-me, how I 'do husband my sheckels for weeks
ahead;
When time comes, I ride the rods or the blind baggage
To the city,
Go on a glorious spree for a week,
Sober off for two or three days,
Ride blind baggage home.
Believe me, that's the life!

ON THE DES MOINES

And when Dad dies and the land is in my name,
Life's going to be one continuous circus celebration,
Take it from me.

Damn-me, how I envy you sleepy fishermen,
And toothless, old God-fearing grandames—
Don't make a noise or you'll scare away the fish—
I can't waste more o' my time here;
I know where's a hole that's lousy with catfish;
I got to hurry on

And catch a mess in time for Dad's dinner.
Meet me in Chicago last week in next November;
Show you the time o' your frivolous young life."
The neck and shoulders of a bull
And the head like a cannon ball
Leaves me.

Last I hear is an emphatic "damn-me"
As the clumsy toe stumbles over a rock.
At the same instant comes a strike at my bait
So violent it lifts me from my stone.
I loosen and tighten the reel;
Feel the line sing in the foaming water;
Expect the pole to snap into a thousand pieces every
second;

Control the wild charging of the fish;
After twenty minutes I land me an eight-pound bass.
I search the shore in vain, for an hour;
In a cove underneath the elms,
I come upon an old fisherman;
The bull-neck and shoulders have just disappeared

ON THE DES MOINES

Through the scrub oaks;
Regularly twice a week he comes to buy a mess of
catfish.

No doubt the bullet-head is still innocent
Of the joy of a harmless fisherman.

IV

MY INSURANCE AGENT

This day as I angle,
Comes a rubber sort of man;
Seems the toy-maker accidentally
Has bumped him on the crown
Before he was thoroughly hardened.
He is bulged at the girth,
His head flat,
His cheeks and chin flabby,
He walks like a crop-stuffed duck.
He sits with a thump,
Wheezes and puffs for a time,
Catches his breath and begins:
"A wonderful river!"
With a nod I assent.
"A wonderful place to fish."
Again I agree.
"Wonderful fishes, too."
"And wonderful men to catch them!"
This time I cap him.
"Right you are," he smiles satisfied.
He fastens an enormous spoon-hook,
Casts it out some ten feet from the shore,
And then chatters on like the water over the ripples.
"A beautiful state is this Iowa;
I never had seen any other till four years ago

ON THE DES MOINES

I motored out to Los Angeles.
All the while I was crossing the mountains,
I shivered, and wished myself home.
I remembered what one of our senators
In Congress had said years ago:
'When God walked across the prairie,
He left, where he stepped, a dimple,
Where he hungered he sowed fields of corn,
Where he thirsted, he planted a river.'
My, how I do enjoy it!
Richest land on the face of the earth,
Soon will bring five hundred an acre;
Richest people, too, for that matter.
Why this very ground where we're sitting
Will soon be layed out in lots,
And sold for a thousand dollars
To summer residents."
"Ever fished much?" I ask with a yawn.
"Never fished any; seems strange;
Always lived here by the river;
Come probably once a summer
On a picnic to please the children.
I never could understand fishermen,
Always idling away their existence,
While I, selling land and insurance,
Am making money hand over fist.
One cannot do business with them;
They seem so like the sparrows,
Depending on Providence.

ON THE DES MOINES

It makes not the least impression
To argue they ought to protect
Their families from the poorhouse;
I never could understand them."
"How it happens you come a-fishing?"
I ask, again growing sleepy.
"You see, the doctor prescribes it,
Says I got the diabetes,
Sitting long hours in my office;
I need the sunshine and air, and plain diet;
Sends me out with a pole to fish.
Pretty soft medicine, eh?
Think I shall come to like it,
Though I don't seem to catch any fish,
While you go on filling your stringer."
"Fishing's like selling insurance;
A great deal of skill to the art.
Doesn't seem reasonable, does it,
A fish should bite a bare hook
Lying flat on the sand?
Might just as well try to market blue sky to a
banker,
Or insure plain fishermen."
"Got your life insured?" He is talking shop at last.
"Yes, insured against wind and weather,
Insured with the gods of the river
In the guild of good fishermen;
Insurance to cover digestion,
The greed of grubbing for money,

ON THE DES MOINES

The faith in materialism,
The pride in efficiency.
Sorry you've come too late
To grow in love with our guild:
The fee is a skillful hand,
And a simple knowing heart."
He clumsily jerks his spoon-hook,
Gouges a sunfish under the chin,
With an awkward, excited twitch,
He lands it high in the tree top;
Then he turns and cranes his short neck.
"What you think of that for a catch?
What you call it; a sunfish, eh?
Can't catch catfish and pickerel,
Why, catch what you can.
By Jove, it's a beautiful fish."
"Beauty's surest excuse for being."
With this I lift my stringer
And leave him surveying the heavens.
Next day when I come to angle,
The over-grown spoon-hook
And shriveled dried sunfish
Are still serene in the tree top.

V

MY DEACON

On a Sunday morning
In my accustomed place by the river;
This time with my Jesus and his simple fisherfolk.
I discourse with them as they leave the water,
And rove up and down through the villages
Baiting their hooks to catch men.
The deacon comes by purposely to reprove the way-
ward,
And interrupts my meditation.
His manner radiates egotism;
He instinctively feels he owns all that he meets;
His mouth reminds one of a frog.
Fortunately my fellow fisherman,
As he dangles his heels from a dead tree bole,
Meets him first.
I sit by and listen not unconcernedly.
"Good morning,"
The deacon begins in a spiritual accent.
"Good morning,"
Replies my fisherman cheerily without turning his
head.
"Won't you sit and fish for a time?"
"I prefer to stand;
I avoid ever the semblance of evil:
It is very wrong to fish on the Lord's day."

ON THE DES MOINES

If he had said Sabbath,
My fisherman would have inferred a different denomination.

"You are the authority?"

"My Bible is the authority." This is an injured manner.

"Was not Simeon Peter a good fisherman?

If I forget not, he angled on Sunday:

How is it I read he rested on a Saturday?"

"You trifle; I refuse to argue."

"Very well; but why avoid so studiously,

The slightest appearance of evil?"

"I prefer to set an example before the world."

"You mean, your reputation, your deaconship, is at stake?"

"I mean what I say; I travel the narrow way,
That sinners may witness, and err not therein."

"The sinners you have in mind

Are mostly simpering women and deacons,

Minded like you, yourself;

And not simple fishermen like me."

"You are positively insulting."

"I mean not the slightest offense in the world;

I assure you, I am trying simply to fathom you.

On Sunday you bear testimony to sinners:

What is your business during the week?"

"President of the First National Bank of Humboldt."

"You run your church on an efficiency basis?"

"Precisely; I am chairman of the finance committee."

"And your minister?"

"A perfect gentleman; he never injures one's feelings;

Even the likes of you

Could feel perfectly safe in hearing him."

"You advise him carefully?"

"Not exactly—

But he lays his subjects for sermons before us

Two or three months in advance."

"Would you exchange him,

And place Jesus Christ in your pulpit, were he alive?"

"Why do you blaspheme?"

"I am speaking simple wisdom:

Was the Christ ever thought of as safe

By any save old-fashioned fishermen?

How I'd like to see him cast bait

Among a school of you croppies;

Wouldn't he gouge your gullets!"

"May the Lord strike you dumb for such blasphemy."

"Jesus Christ even now is abroad in the world,

In spite of your self-employed righteous,

Who indoctrinate him in Oriental creed,

And house him in mediaeval stained glass,

And interpret him through a harmless, intimidated ministry.

This morning I have come to the river to study him:

I see him in everything about me:

ON THE DES MOINES

In the industrious sunfish that tirelessly circles her spawn;

In the home-loving wren,

That rears her young, and sings at her labor;

In the flowers and the trees;

In the petrified life of the rock at my feet;

In the quiet fishermen about me."

"Well, I must be going along;

I'll be missing my Bible class if I don't:

I'll place your name on my list for special prayers."

"Better keep your prayer for yourself!"

I would tell you before you go,

I have known your likes before;

Once I was cashier for one

Who was Elder in Zion on Sunday,

And the Prince of Money Changers on Monday."

The Deacon scurries off with a whiff.

"You were harsh with him, I fear,"

I comment aloud to myself; but my fisherman overhears me.

"Next Sunday, I have not a doubt,

He will pass on the other side of the river."

But for the future,

I promise myself to pursue the more faithfully

My Jesus of Nazareth,

My Socrates of Alpoece,

My Sir Izaak Walton of Stafford.

For these are, for all time,

The best of the guild of good fishermen.

ON THE DES MOINES

VI

MY LAWYER

Up from a hearty dinner of pike
And seated by the river.
Comes the beetling brow of a Daniel Webster
With a slouchy, stiff-bosomed dignity.
The mouth runs tobacco juice,
Drips from chin to breast;
The girth is swollen wide like a sunfish.
The man shambles down to the river,
Sits with a thump and a grunt,
Stows a fresh quid in his flabby left cheek,
And finally baits his hook.
"What you using?"
"Chicken guts," he mumbles, "best bait in the
world."
I still prefer clam.
"Used to fish quite a lot;
If the river is what once it was,
This hole should be lousy with catfish—
But times do change."
He draws from his hip a flask of five-year-old whisky.
I smell it merely through courtesy;
But he gulps the third of a pint,
Draws his sleeve across his mouth,
And loudly smacks his lips.
Soon he grows reminiscent, and talks

ON THE DES MOINES

Without noticing me or even his empty hook.
"God how things do change;
Never thought it would come to this.
When I began the practice of law
After reading under my Uncle Marcus,
I was ambitious;
I planned to be a Senator at Washington.
Got started right, too:
Two terms in the state legislature,
Laid some money aside for the larger campaign;
Had to be a good fellow,
Could carry under my belt as many drachms as my
neighbor;
Could winnow the votes like hell,
Knew all the tricks of the trade,
Could flatter and boost in a way to deceive the devil;
Was my local district's idol;
And yes, I could turn my rhetoric;
I nominated for President Iowa's favorite son,
Brought cheer after cheer from the National Con-
vention,
More for my speech than my man.
But I couldn't quite land a berth in the Senate,
Spent most of my money trying,
Got to drinking a little heavy,
Had my fling with the women,
Always proved myself a good fellow.
My wife,
When she found I couldn't be Senator,

ON THE DES MOINES

Divorced me with alimony.
Instead of learning my lesson,
I went in for more dissipation,
But my troubles wouldn't drown.
My political friends played for my waning influence.
I tried lone-handed to win a number of petty offices.
Slowly I settled down to a bare, stingy living,
Wrote insurance, made collections, plead stinking divorce suits.
The bar, at its coming session, will revoke my license.
Leaves a bad taste in one's mouth."
With this, he drains his flagon of whisky.
"Well, life's a damned funny game;
It's a good deal like river fishing;
You find the right bait and you find the right hole,
And your stringer fills like magic;
Success breeds courage, and courage, success.
But it's hell when you fail, and men know it,
When the fish refuse your bait,
And swallow your rival's bare hook.
Failure breeds hatred and jealousy,
And hatred and jealousy, failure.
It's hell to be down and out and to know it,
And to know that your enemies know it.
Damn, I can't make a single catch;
Here you are with your stringer filled,
And I with my can of chicken guts!
I might just as well waddle back,
Squat in my dingy office,

ON THE DES MOINES

Soak my belly with whisky,
Swallow life's bitterest pill,
Await the Judge's verdict.
Even the river loses its charm,
And fishing its appetite,
For such an one as I."
Laboriously he rises,
Stretches his bloated legs,
Throws the guts in disgust to the fishes
And hobbles back to his office.

VII

MY POLITICIAN

In the morning,
Bait can and pole in hand, on the way to the river,
Comes a hearty, resonant, nasal call:
"Neighbor, good morning;
No objection, we'll walk together."
I assure my man 'tis a pleasure.
"Have a smoke?" He speaks professionally.
I politely refrain; I have already scented the weed.
His head is thrown forward;
His spectacles ride on the end of a ponderous nose,
And his beady eyes o'erlook them;
His chest is flat, his stomach high;
His breeches bag at the knee;
His shoes leave him visibly flat-footed.
His jerky waddle tries at a hopeless dignity.
"Golly, I'm happy this morning;
First time in three months I've felt easy;
Burned and given away thirty-seven boxes of stogies."
The one he is smoking smells positively vile.
"Talked with every man in my district,
And landed the nomination; same as being elected.
My wife thought I ought to rest for the day;
So she packed me off to the river.
What was I running for?

ON THE DES MOINES

Surely I thought I had met you:
State Senator, of course."
"You should have come down to the river."
"Thought I'd been everywhere;
But somehow I missed the fishermen;
I hope they won't take offense.
How did I get my votes?
I tried to please everybody.
Of course I was raised in the district,
Always voted the ticket straight;
Father fought in the Rebellion,
Son, a Spanish-American Veteran,
Grandson just back from France.
The doctors and dentists I promised my vote
Against medical schools of low standing,
The farmers I promised low taxes,
Automobile owners good roads without raising their
license,
The merchants, my vote against mail-order houses,
The temperance forces, my vote against drink.
The largest crowd were the Germans:
I hired their best politician
To drive me about in a house to house canvass:
He explained I would vote for their interests,
Conversed in their own language;
At the end I passed the smokes.
In my home district,
I got my friends together in a political rally,
Widely heralded their endorsement;

ON THE DES MOINES

This worked everywhere but at home,
Where my local enemies beat me three to one.
They had no business to do it;
I've lived among them for fifteen years."
Having reached the river, I sit;
My Senator anchors his pole with a rock,
And nervously waddles about,
Burning his vile-smelling stogies,
And feeling already a Senator.
Occasionally he slaps his knee and chuckles;
Often he knits his brow, and wishes some error
righted.
Once he retreats afar,
And when he returns, what I smell on his breath
I dare not relate for political reasons;
But I notice he talks the more fluently:
"I tell you, to get ahead in this workaday world,
One must please the people,
Find what they want, and make them believe they
get it:
It's the result of all boosting together.
Yes, I'll be paid for the time and the money I've
wasted;
There are lots of ways;
Senator's votes on important bills, for instance."
"I'll have to be going to dinner,"
I speak as I lift my stringer,
"Are you sure that your hook is baited?"
"I don't care enough to look;

ON THE DES MOINES

I'm feeling too good to sit still;
I've got to be moving about.
I don't see much anyhow to this fishing;
My wife was a fool to send me down to the river;
I better be going back, and finish my day in town."
I leave him unjointing his pole,
Violently smoking,
And slapping his knee and chuckling.

VIII

MY RETIRED GROCER

At a bend in the shore,
Where the corn runs down to the river,
And the sun shines hot and sultry,
I have frequently seen a fisherman
In broad-brimmed straw hat,
Heavy gallasses over his shoulders,
Seated, a hand on each knee,
Between two long cane poles anchored over the
water.

One day I find my way to his side, peer beneath the
broad brim:

"Fishing good?"

"No not very; too many 'tortles' and carp.

You'll have to speak louder;

I don't hear so well as I should."

"What kind of fish do you catch?"

"Mostly catfish and bullheads.

Catfish pretty sneaking, they bite and are gone;

Don't often fasten themselves unless you have hold
of the pole."

"You've a bite," I shout as the cork dances.

"Only a nibble; guess it's a bullhead or carp.

Carp often nibble a half hour or more

Before they take it and go.

The carp—we don't eat them;

ON THE DES MOINES

I give what I catch to the neighbors."
Comes a sudden jerk at the bobber;
He scrambles to catch up his pole.
" 'Twas a catfish,"
He raises his pole and fastens a bait of beef liver.
He is using the wheel from one of his grandson's
toys
For a sinker;
His lines are mended and old,
And his poles are smeared with dried liver.
Comes a frantic dancing of the other bobber,
And then a sudden pull.
"It's a bullhead this time I have fastened."
Sure enough he lands a bullhead.
"Get enough of them, makes a fine chowder."
While he pulls from his pocket the stringer,
At his other bait comes a nibble:
"That's a 'turtle,' I see by his manner."
But later it proves a small carp.
And while he is stringing this fish
Comes a violent pull at the other.
"Them catfish are terrible robbers;
Some mornings I feed them a pound of liver.
One day three fastened themselves;
That's the best I have done this season."
"Lived long in Iowa," I query.
"Came here in fifty-seven, a lad of seventeen.
Served in the Great Rebellion
Four years and eleven months,

ON THE DES MOINES

Last nine months in Andersonville."
"Must have been pretty tough."
"O we had to grin and bear it.
Came home and settled in Cedarville,
Went into the grocery business,
Kept on pegging along until June nineteen-ten;
Wife died and son took my business;
Came here to live with my daughter.
Soon found I had to keep busy;
Staying home doing nothing most killed me.
Eyes too weak for reading,
Ears too deaf for talking,
Body too nervous for sitting,
Mind too empty for dreaming.
Indoors, I sleep in the daytime,
And then lie awake through the night.
Wish I could wade in the water,
Then I could catch bigger fish,
But my rheumatiz won't let me.
Got the neuralgia bad,
Haven't had it now for a spell,
But today I feel it returning;
It's gathering here in my ear,
That's the reason I don't understand you
So well as I should.
No, I don't catch many big fish;
Once this spring I fastened a catfish,
Looked as big as a log,
Must have weighed ten or twelve pound;

ON THE DES MOINES

But I saw as I raised him I hadn't a very deep hold,
And he flapped against the bank, and I lost him.
This fishing keeps me employed,
It gives me the air and the sunshine,
It keeps me awake through the daytime,
Helps me to sleep through the night,
Makes me forget my neuralgia and rheumatiz.
Why, last week when I landed,
In a single day, those three catfish,
I forgot I was old and crippled,
For well nigh forty-eight hours.
Why, the Lord being willing,
I expect to live fifteen years."
The gleam grows deep in his eyes,
And his nose and chin forget they are growing together,
And his ear forgets its pain,
As he flusters to keep his hooks baited,
And the catfish and "tortles" grow fat.
I leave him still alternating
The bullheads and carp on his stringer,
And tieing occasionally a "turtle"
Fast to a tree to fetch to his neighbor for soup,
And babbling,
"He won't steal any more bait."
Ever I smile as I dream
Of my cranberry fisherman.

IX

MY DOCTOR

After a breakfast of fish,
As I sit sunning myself turtle-like on a stone,
Awaiting a long-delayed bite,
Comes a smooth-shaven face, tense as steel,
With a half-burned cigar in the teeth,
And a constant twitch of the eyeballs.
"Biting good this morning?" he queries
As he pulls at his gauntlet gloves,
And lengthens his telescoped pole.
"Not that I've noticed."
"Just my luck, it seems;
Don't get down to the river for more than an hour a
month,
And then they are never biting."
I watch him fasten his spoon-hook,
Clutch his pole
As though 'twere the steering wheel of his Ford.
"Oh, yes, I am terribly busy, going night and day,
Hardly find time to eat; someone always needing the
doctor;
Driven two thousand miles since April.
In the spring, it's grippe complications,
In the summer, it's infant diseases,
In the autumn and winter, the old folks;
Forever it's accidents and chronic appendicitis."

ON THE DES MOINES

The while, he jerkily flings his spoon-hook,
And as jerkily reels it in,
Trolls over just those places
That game fish never would frequent,
Constantly halts to light his half-burned cigar,
Takes scarcely a dozen puffs before it needs relighting,
Feverishly paces the shore as a lion its cage.
And all the while he is weighing
The cases he is treating,
Reviewing each separate symptom,
Deciding each change in his medicines.
Finally his spoon-hook lodges
On the under side of a rock;
He tries for a minute to loose it,
Wastes patience, and tears the line.
While he cases his pole at parting,
He speaks in a gruff, hurried accent,
To cover his tenderer feelings:
"Wish I, too, were a turtle instead of a man;
For once in my life I'd like to be lazy,
To dangle my heels in the sun,
With never a fret or a worry.
But folks won't let me be idle;
They ever unceasingly hound me—
Yes, I cheerily give them my service,
Wouldn't have it otherwise.
For twenty years I've been hurrying
With scarcely an hour free from duty;

ON THE DES MOINES

But some day I'm going to cut loose,
I'm going to make friends with the river;
For a month I'll hie me away
From the physical ills of the world.
As it is, I always bring
My pole when I come by the river;
Sometimes by driving hard,
I can filch half an hour by the water.
It gives me a quiet breath,
It helps me study my patients for a minute uninter-
rupted.
Especially I like to come
When I have a hard case to settle.
But I must be hustling along,
Thirty minutes to drive twelve miles,
Case of infantile paralysis, desperate, it seems;
I had just decided the treatment
When my spoon-hook caught on the bottom."
A fresh cigar goes to the mouth,
And the smoke of a dozen quick puffs
Fairly hides his face from my eyes,
And then his teeth shut like a vice.
Soon he scurries over the bank,
Comes the boom of his roaring engine,
And a cloud of dust to the river.

ON THE DES MOINES

X

MY PASTOR

Late Monday morning,
I observe slowly moving toward me,
His hands crossed at his back,
A sweet, weary smile on his countenance,
A look as though he bore
The burden of the world upon his shoulders,—
The good village pastor.
“After two sermons on Sunday,
I like to come down to the running water on Monday.
I like to think how the life of man
Is like the life of the river;
In its turbulent channel it frets,
And flows in every direction save toward the sea.
Yes, I would make a good fisherman—
Only, my congregation thinks it undignified in me.”
Just then comes a strike sends a boom through my
being.
“Here, hold this pole while I relax.”
I move so quickly he does not see what is happening.
Then the reel sings,
And the big fish charges into the depths of the pool.
“Keep your line taut!” I shout.
He needs no counsel.
For half an hour I study the minister,

ON THE DES MOINES

And the uncontrollable, passionate fish.
The look of anguish,
As the line whips and sings with the fresh onset;
The compassionate smile.
As he coaxes the line inch by stubborn inch over the
reel.

I cannot help feeling
It is the way he has with sinners.
Finally, when he sinks limp,
With the eight-pound bass on the pebbles,
I think he wipes a tear with the perspiration,
At sight of what he has done.
"Forthwith, you should join the fisherman's guild,"
I banter.

But he seems not to hear me.
"I could not help thinking, as I struggled,
How like the uncontrolled fury of a hooked bass,
Is the husband of one of my faithful members."
"I thought as much."
"This experience will do me good in wrestling with
sinners.

I wish I were so successful, always.
How much human misery needs alleviating;
How many unbridled sinners
Need the feel of the barb of salvation tug at their
jaw.
How I enjoy thinking of Christ
And his incomparable fishermen, down by the water's
edge:

ON THE DES MOINES

Peter had fished all the night,
And was weary and careworn with failure,
Even as I am aweary with my sterile efforts.
Then the Master told him to cast in afresh:
See his joy with his sudden catch:
Here's my sermon awaiting the coming Sabbath;
And this is my text through the whole of the week.
Now I shall take fresh courage
To win my three debauched sinners,
Help them to bridle their passions.
I must not tarry longer;
There are so few workers to heal the bruises of men,
So few unselfish lives
To set at right the evil of the world."
"You are forgetting your fish."
"I cannot take it;
Some might misunderstand; it might injure the
cause;
We must labor as lambs among wolves."
At parting, with hands across back,
He casts a sidelong smile of love.
I trudge a long two miles through dust and sun,
To fetch the fish to the wife of the good man.
And as I go,
I spread the news of the modest parson's catch
To the incredulous crowd.
Next Sunday when he speaks on fishermen,
The pews are packed with honest, gaping laborers
and merchants;

ON THE DES MOINES

Of those who listen most intently to know the message

Are the three debauched men of his parish.

XI

MY FARM GIRL

In the evening I am pretending to fish.
It is unpleasant to be thought sentimental;
I thus have the chance unobserved
To study the thousand blended colors
In the water and the sky.
Out of myself I fly on a shaft of light
That runs like a Jacob's ladder,
Topping the infinity of a Turneresque sky.
From my station in the seventh heaven,
Suddenly I hear a low, heart-rending moan,
Such as comes with the dejection of instant death:
"God have mercy;
My blood upon his head, not upon mine own!"
I turn just to see
The half-kneeling figure of a woman
Plunge into the water.
Instantly, I fasten my hook in her hair,
Direct her to an eddy in the current,
Plunge in and drag her ashore.
"Stop wringing of your hands, look into the sky;
Life's wonderfully worth while,
It's as if God had just created a new heaven and a
new earth."
She brushes her straggling hair aslant her face,
And looks.

ON THE DES MOINES

Her filmy garments fall about her flesh in clear.
strong lines—

A perfect base relief for a monument

Addressed to human vanity.

"Are you climbing the Jacob's ladder of the imagination?"

The terror suddenly leaps from her face;

A dimple invites the admiration to the left cheek.

"O Sir, it's perfectly lovely."

I silently study the soft round features—

Docility and trust, and an easy acquiescence;

A nature more to breed passion in a man than restraint.

When the woman takes her eyes off the sunset

And turns them upon me,

There falls over her a heavy mantle of betrayed innocence,

Of distrust of man, of despair with human life,

Of terror of death.

"O Sir, why did you do it?" she pleads hopelessly.

"If you hadn't interfered I'd be at perfect peace now."

"The sunset is still aglow;

Look into it and tell me why *you* did it."

Her face cannot but soften as her imagination

Climbs the sky and gradually lifts the ladder after it.

"Why should I tell you? You are a man."

"You are mistaken; I'm a fisherman."

ON THE DES MOINES

"What's the difference?"

"Just this; fishing makes one quiet and gracious.

Notice the delicate wine that floods river and sky."

"Yes; when I bathe my senses in it I want to talk."

"You have my leave."

"From childhood I had but a single dream;

I wanted a husband at my hearth and a babe in my
arms.

I was looking at a sunset like this

When first I saw the vision;

And it was later,

When my young breasts throbbed with life,

That he came out of the sunset just as I had dreamed.

I see him now as he leapt from the buggy,

And came lithely up the gravel walk to greet me.

It was more than a year—O such a year of sunsets!

Then I proudly displayed my ring;

In it I could see all the colors of the evening sky;

And I was entirely happy.

One evening we were driving the long lonely road

That follows the marge of the river:

A long shaft of light flew to the summit of the sky;

I climbed upon it in my dreams

Even as a beam of light had climbed aloft

On the thinnest gossamer:

It was there that he deceived me with vows of eter-
nal love.

But soon afterward he sickened of me;

ON THE DES MOINES

He found another girl who would inherit more money
than I;

He did not sympathize with my sense for the beautiful,

He thought only of fleshly passion.

A week ago, we were quarreling

As we crossed the river bridge yonder;

I flung his ring, with my heart in it,

Into the running water.

Now he is keeping company with this other virgin,

While I fret out the disgrace of a drab wench,

And find no sunset friend in all the earth."

"Poor child; the way of many a half-fledged robin

That is plucked before it has learned to fly.

Your ring, the sightless clam,

That wears a hidden jewel ever in its heart,

Delivered to me yesterday from its unwilling mouth,

As I disgorged it of my hook;

Wear it for old-time sake.

Tomorrow, when he comes to the river,

I'll bait my hook with the clam's secret;

I'll see he comes to you with the next sunset."

The blue wells of her eyes grow very deep,

A great sigh lifts somewhere from the depths of her
bosom.

"You are the first man I've known

Who sees that there is more to life than hogs and
corn."

I thank her.

ON THE DES MOINES

I lead her back through the deepening shadows of
night,

Across the patch of scrub-oak woods,

Past the gooseberry brambles,

Over the high barbed wire fence,

Down the long lane between the endless corn blooms,

And set her at last safe on her father's door-step.

"Fishermen are entirely gracious: one other man will
be

When I have finished with him on the morrow, never
fear."

I hold her small, cool, crumpled hand between my
own;

I feel the tears, and catch the sob of prayer,

As I retreat between the endless corn blooms.

XII

MY SUFFRAGIST

For a number of days, I have noticed a woman,
With writing pad on knee, sitting under an oak
Overlooking the river.
I make bold one day
To arrive earlier than she and await her.
I am pretending to read as I watch her approach;
She stops frequently to use her field glasses,
She is interesting herself especially in the birds;
As she comes near,
I cannot help admiring the visionary cast of her
countenance;
It is that of a dreamer
Who has had a vision of what the larger world might
be;
Who has realized in part, and been disappointed in
part,
In bringing people to see the world through her eyes.
The silvery hair sits upon the brow in a crown of
glory;
The manner tells me she has lately come
From the companionship of the prophetic souls of
the earth.
When the gray eyes look down upon me,
I realize for the first time in my life,
The supremacy of woman, and the mereness of man.

ON THE DES MOINES

I arise, hat in hand, to go.

Something in my aspect arouses the woman's curiosity.

"What are you reading?"

"My Walton," I stammer like a boy.

"Hasn't he been displaced yet?"

"He is one of the few rare men

Who are destined to outlive many ambitious generations."

"What is his message to you?"

"It is the simple message of the river.

As well displace the river itself as my good fisherman.

Much is the water that flows over the ripples

In three score years and ten;

But the river is forever the same;

It has a message for each shifting generation of men;

It is the message of the eternal to the ephemeral of each age;

It is the message of the river's bed to the flowing current,

The message of the deeper pools

To the lashing of the wind and the burning of the sun;

It is the message of experience to modernism.

It teaches me to be quiet

In the face of the turmoil of the world;

And in the face of conflict, to find peace."

"I am so glad you so love the river.

ON THE DES MOINES

It has had a large place in my life, too.
I was reared here on the prairie in the pioneer days.
The dreams of my young womanhood
Were closely associated with this spot where we now
stand.

I loved to be here alone;
Mother often sent me to the river
To catch fish to furnish our scanty board;
Many was the delayed dinner because of my dreams.
My young life rebelled against the inferiority
Assigned to woman in the earth by man;
In all the world of Nature I saw no analogy;
The female birds, the beasts, the fishes
Were everywhere free to be the equal of their mates.
And in the early pioneer life it was the same with
woman;

Of all the hardships, she bore her share;
She defended the house and the children
While the man went many miles to market;
When the crops were to be harvested,
She worked in the fields beside the man;
When her home and her existence were endangered,
She fought the prairie fires beside husband and children;

It was her smile that brightened the fireside;
And her courage made the desolate prairie winters
bearable;

She shared everything except the vote.
Because this right was denied her,

ON THE DES MOINES

Man refused to acknowledge her his equal;
Everywhere, laws were unfair to her,
Everywhere social traditions hampered her development.

It was beneath this oak
I pledged my life to fight for woman's freedom.
Unknown to father, I studied here uninterrupted.
He always teased me because I was such a poor fish-
erwoman,

Because it took me so long to catch a mess of crop-
pies.

I allowed him to deceive himself as much as he liked,
And bided my time.

It was here that I studied to pass the examination
For my first teacher's certificate,

It was here I rehearsed my first political speech,

It is here I come a week or two each summer

To renew my old spirit of devotion to the cause.

I have been honored by my sisters the world over;

I have made speeches in most of the leading cities

Of Europe and America;

And now, thank God, my eyes have seen the glory

Of the coming of Woman's Suffrage.

And it is to the river I owe most of my success.

It has been a distinct pleasure to meet you."

I am bowed out of her presence as gracefully

As the King could wish to be dismissed

From the palace of the Queen of the Fairies.

My effort to tell her the pleasure

ON THE DES MOINES

At the meeting has been all mine,
Falls unheard upon ears already listening
To the tread of the oncoming hosts
Of the army of conquering women.

XIII

MY SOCIETY DAME

Wading in the river casting for bass.
I hear before me a long sustained vibrant a-a-a,
And then an o-o-o.
Some elocutionist exercising her lungs,
I say to myself immediately.
As I approach,
I catch an occasional phrase of some memorized selection.
It is just my luck
To hook a fish immediately beneath where she is standing.
I make bold to land it at the woman's feet.
The first glance at her face is disappointing;
The single pronounced feature is the chin.
"I am sorry to interrupt you."
"I am glad to see you land so fine a fish."
"You have evidently studied in the East."
"Yes, in Boston."
"At the Emerson School?"
"Yes, how did you guess?"
"Your accent, and your manner;
I have lived in Boston myself, don't you know."
"I feel flattered;
I feared I was losing the manner
I had worked so hard to attain.—

ON THE DES MOINES

But your accent does not betray your residence in
the East."

"I likewise have studied—to conceal.

You liked Boston?"

"Immensely! All my friends say I rave about New
England

Until they are crazy."

"You recite often?"

"Oh, yes, more than is good for my voice;

Just now I am practicing for Old Settlers' Day;

My grandfather was the first to take up a home-
stead

In this county.

But most of my work is with the Artists' Club;

This meets once a week;

Really, you have no idea what a lot of talent

We have going to waste here in town.

It was my idea when I returned from my study

To organize all the women

Who had gone East for their training.

We have several who have taken Piano

At the Fine Arts Institute in Chicago;

Two or three who have studied in Cleveland and
Pittsburg;

One lady from Philadelphia who does beautiful Water-
Color;

Three who have studied Voice and one Aesthetic
Dancing

In New York City;

ON THE DES MOINES

Oh yes, and we have another who has studied Clay
Modeling

In Columbus.

No other town of the same size in Iowa

Can boast an equal array of talent.

Really, I do not know what I should do

Without some such club to keep me informed

Concerning the newer movements in the art world.

We open our meetings with a reading;

I usually interpret Browning or Edgar Lee Masters.

Then we have a paper and a round-table discussion

Of some contemporary artist, musician, or poet;

Always we end the afternoon with pink tea a la mode.

It helps to keep one alive socially, don't you know.

We do everything strictly in accordance

With the most correct rules of social etiquette;

We equal even Chicago, or New York, or Boston.

Many of us trace our ancestry to the *Mayflower* and
to Pocahontas."

"You are the third generation of Iowa settlers:

The first two generations were toilers;

Your grandmother was a frontiers woman;

Your mother labored early and late

To develop the original claim;

The land boom has made you

The first generation of gentlewomen of the Com-
monwealth."

"Yes, and we are proud of the fact,

We are establishing traditions

ON THE DES MOINES

Our granddaughters will feel honored to follow."
She glances at her wrist watch.
"My, I did not realize the time was flying so fast;
My car is waiting;
Won't you call before you leave the neighborhood;
It seems so good, don't you know, to see someone
Who is familiar with Huntington Avenue.
I am at home every Thursday from three to five."
I thank her kindly;
Fortunately my society togs are in the city.
Soon she gallops away through the scrub oak woods
to the waiting car.
I have been conscious, the time she is speaking,
Of the strange blending of Iowa and New England
accents,
Of the confused R and A sounds,
Of the conscious artificiality of manner,
Of the acquired veneer of culture,
Money has partly polished the exterior;
But the third generation of gentlewomen,
In days to come, from this prairie,
Will be the queens of the earth.

XIV

MY I. W. W. LABORER

In the early morning, slowly walking under the trees,
Meditating the Sermon on the Mount,
And watching the new-born day whisper its greet-
ings to the river.

In the distance, at the edge of a deep pool,
Below the long, shallow ripple,
Where the big fish love to congregate,
And where the true fisherman finds his paradise,
I observe a man casting his hook into the water,
And removing it with a series of long, sharp jerks.
Often he turns his glance to see if he is observed.
I proceed cautiously; I stand unnoticed beside him.
His stout arms and back pull savagely,
His face bears the black look of defiance and anger,
The quid of tobacco shows through his drawn cheek
like a wen,

His eyes have the glare of opaque buttons.

He petrifies for an instant to find me so near.

"There is a law against snagging," I observe quietly.

"The hell there is!" he blusters.

"Your name is John Hill?"

"None of your damned business."

"If you are caught snagging again, you will be fined."

"You go to the devil!"

"Another word of your impudence,

ON THE DES MOINES

And I shall see that you are fined for this offense."

With these words I barb him,

And he wriggles up beside me like a shamefaced catfish.

"Let me have your pole, and I will show you the better way;

Give me the spoon-hook from your hat band."

I fling the triple hook and the heavy leaden ball,

With which he has been snagging, far into the stream.

"Come with me to another pool;

You have frightened these fishes out of their senses."

As we proceed, I make the hook secure,

And discourse along the way:

"The good fisherman loves his fishes;

He studies to know their seasons and their appetites;

He takes only what he wishes to eat;

He is careful to wound none that he does not land.

The evil one comes among them to snag;

He gores their sides and their bellies,

And leaves them to waste away and to rot on the ripples;

In the end, he lands but the worthless carp and buffalo."

While I cast for pickerel, I invite my Unspeakable Turk to talk:

"What is your business?"

"I am a member of the I. W. W.;

I clean cesspools for a living; I defy law."

ON THE DES MOINES

"Disobey, you mean;
You come as a thief in the night, and as a robber."
"The laws are all wrong."
"You mean you are all wrong:
Within, you are a defiled beast;
Without, you are a law-breaker."
"I know no law but the law of my own being."
"You mean you are a savage:
Civilization means restraint, restraint means law,
Law means obedience both to the letter and to the
spirit."
I feel a heavy strike, but I miss my fish;
'I'll barb him in a minute,' I say to myself.
"You are a hundred years behind the times."
"But you are a hundred centuries behind," I retort.
With this I land him a fine pickerel for his dinner.
"You need to understand
That there is law for fishing and law for conduct;
One needs must study to obey cheerfully.
Your fisherman, who is ignorant of the ways of fishes,
Snags because he cannot make an honest catch.
Your good fisherman knows only the joy of right fish-
ing;
He revels for days over a good catch.
It is so with the law:
Your anarchist has never brought his soul
Into obedience to his reason;
The servant, he allows to run riot within the master's
house."

ON THE DES MOINES

"Yes, but the world has not given me a square deal;
I should receive ten dollars a day for my labor."

"You mean, you have dealt unjustly with the world;
The world must needs deal with your unjust man
after his kind;

It must take away his freedom;

It must bring his lawlessness under restraint.

But there is no law against the intelligent and the
upright;

They are a law unto themselves;

They obey cheerfully because it is a part of their life.

Your good fisherman could not, if he would, snag un-
justly;

Neither could your good citizen

Find happiness in disobeying the law.

But your thief and your robber and your anarchist—"

"You think we are all wrong;

But just wait till we start our revolution

Against organized society."

"A fine revolution the likes of you will start;

One harmless fisherman comes by,

And scares you away from your lawlessness with a
mere threat;

You are right-minded by inheritance,

In spite of your lying semblance.

Take this fish home to your wife;

And when you come again, come to fish honestly."

With this he skulks away shamefaced.

It is not my wont to preach to sinners;

ON THE DES MOINES

But here was a man who needed a liberal disinfecting
With chlorinated lime.

XV

MY UNION LABORER

Again I am seated by the river
With my Socrates and my fishing-pole,
Reasoning about the effect of physical labor on life.
Comes a stumpy sort of man with an overgrown wart
 of a nose,
And the mouth and jaw of a bass.
He jerks his short cane pole,
And sends his bait into the water with a loud splash.
He looks at me and my book with surly insolence.
I put my reading aside, pick up my pole, and fish
 beside him.
My luck is good; I land a six-pound pike.
"Got a stringer?"
"None to lend."
"One to fasten a pike, then;
Too good a fish to bake in the sun."
Finally I have my man fastened at my side
Along with his stringer.
Again my luck is good; I land another pike.
This one goes on my own stringer.
My man looks at me, wonders, unconsciously nibbles
 at my bait:
"Why didn't you use your own stringer to begin
 with?"
"Afraid of breaking it; too many big fish."

ON THE DES MOINES

"You're a queer one."

I thank him.

He peers into my face, turns again to his fishing,
Chews his quid hard, spits lavishly into the water.
My luck continues; I land a third pike.

This one again on his stringer.

"What the devil—" He is visibly irritated, but stops short.

"Better try some of my bait."

"To hell with your bait; I can do my own fishing."

He pulls in a small catfish,

Looks at the pike on his stringer, flings it back into the river.

"Damn such a fish! Just my luck to catch minnows;
I'm only a redhorse minnow myself."

"How so?"

"All bones, no meat:

Everything controlled by the trusts;

Things getting so bad

An ordinary man can't make a decent living

Look at my clothes, look at my food, look at my family;

Living always from hand to mouth,

Always half a year behind in settling my accounts.

Work from one week end to another;

Employers refuse to pay labor a living wage.

Just now our local Union is out on a strike;

I come down to the river;

You men of leisure catch up all the good fish;

ON THE DES MOINES

Lucky if I get a carp.
Something's wrong in the world
When honest labor cannot get an honest wage
Without eternally fighting for it.
The whole organization of society has got to be
changed.
The present Great War has been nothing
Compared to the world war that is to be.
The money lords have got to be put out of business;
Blood will run in rivers until the sea belches red
foam.
There's got to be an end to the inordinate thefts
Of men of money;
What labor earns, labor must receive.
Where would your Rockefellers and your Mogans be
Were it not for their thefts from the laboring
classes?
Think what human misery would have been allevi-
ated,
Had their millions been distributed
Among the families of the men whose muscle and
sweat produced it,
Instead of being locked behind sealed vaults.
Society's got to be reorganized on the basis of broth-
erhood;
We've all got to work for society;
We've got to eliminate the polite pirates
Who prey upon the masses of honest citizens,

ON THE DES MOINES

And corner ninety-five per cent of all the money in the world.

God has furnished the world with plenty;

What we've got to demand is honest distribution.

These ideas are not new;

They have been known from the times of Socrates and of Christ."

"What you know about Socrates?" I interrupt unconsciously.

"I read quite a lot about him in my Union paper;

Also read quite a bit about the social teachings of Christ.

The right is on our side, and we all know it.

Don't accuse us of hostility to society;

Society is hostile toward us;

We're only fighting for what rightfully belongs to us."

With this I lift my stringer.

"We have been given sufficient fish for both our dinners;

We shall not quarrel over the distribution."

My Union man peers at me again; this time in amazement.

"The pike on my stringer mine?" He gasps.

"I intended they should be yours all the while."

"God, I believe you're a regular fellow;

I'd like to get better acquainted."

I thank him again.

For the first time, the lines of his mouth soften:

ON THE DES MOINES

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"One who studies his Socrates, his Jesus, and his Walton,

Who listens much to the voice of the river,
And goes often a-fishing.

When you are minded, come again;

You shall hardly fail to find me with my book and my pole."

As I turn to go, he stares after me with gaping mouth.

XVI

MY CONTRACTOR

Another day by the river fishing.
Comes a mountain of a man:
From the waist upward he is a giant.
He walks flatfooted and heavy;
His features are sharp, his brown eyes, merry.
He carries the best agate-tipped Bristol pole,
And the best tested silk line, that money can buy.
"I'm looking for someone to catch me a mess of fish,"
He smiles.
"Why not catch them yourself?"
"Well, sir, it isn't in me;
I can boss a gang of Union men,
And get as much out of them as the next contractor;
But fish nature is beyond me.
A year or two ago,
I bought the best tackle that money could buy—
All sorts of hooks and artificial bait that were ever
invented.
And I've always lived beside rivers and lakes and the
coast;
I've fished a great deal, too.
Don't know what I would do should I catch a really
big game fish;
Never caught one in my life."

ON THE DES MOINES

"Pretty bright day for game fishing; good day for cat-fish.

Put on a bait of clam, and we will fish together."

"I'll buy all you catch; but I'm doubtful about myself.

Why, last year after I'd got my fine tackle,

I came fishing with Tom Bigsby:

We had exactly the same kind of red phantom minnow;

My pole and line were much superior;

We fished side by side;

Tom caught a six-pound pike, and then an eight-pound pike;

We changed places and poles;

And Tom caught a seven-pound pike, and then a nine-pounder;

And I had not a single strike.

I bought his biggest fish for a dollar,

Went home, and swore never to fish again.

And I wouldn't be here now, were it not for my wife."

I soon see my contractor is no fisherman;

He is too desperately in a hurry to make a catch;

He seems to figure his time at about ten dollars an hour;

He must keep moving every minute;

He cannot give the fish time to take his bait;

He must jerk it in and cast it out with a continual splash.

"How is building this season?"

ON THE DES MOINES

I lure him away from his fishing.
"Slow; the Trusts and the Unions
Make the contractor's job impossible; one can't do a
thing.
Building materials are cornered by the Trusts,
The War has given them the chance to rob with
greater ease;
Labor is controlled by the Unions;
One might just as well give the men what they ask;
To fume and sweat about 'it, only gets one in bad,
Gets one boycotted:
Thing to do is to charge it up to the landlord,
Let him charge it up in higher rent;
All goes into the higher cost of living;
All the result of the materialistic conception of life,
Of the competitive system of business,
Of each hog rooting for himself.
My policy is simply to keep sweet,
Jolly people along, make friends with everybody,
Boost everybody, get what concessions I can,
Do a little better than my competing contractors,
Lay by a comfortable income."
By fishing hard,
I have caught sufficient for my contractor's dinner.
I refuse his money;
Tell him that fishing makes one entirely independent
Of silver and gold.
But I must needs argue half an hour

ON THE DES MOINES

To get him to take the catch to his wife with my
compliments.

He still believes me not quite right in my mind;

He cannot comprehend why I refused his dollar.

I go home to read my Republic and my Sermon on
the Mount,

And to wonder why men carry with them

Into their workaday lives so few ideas and ideals,

Why they make a bare living so hard for one another,

When it should, withal, be so easy.

XVII

MY RIVER RAT

Often as I pass down the river
I notice idly at anchor, a clumsy home-made punt.
I wonder what workman has wrought it, and so sit
down to fish.
Suddenly comes a man from the bushes:
God seems to have made him as children mold a snow-
man:
Two finger prints for eyes, a slit of the thumb for
a mouth,
And an icicle for a nose—
With features frozen and empty.
He wears a frayed straw hat,
With a spoon-hook, a phantom minnow, and various
other tackle,
Dangling about the band;
A blue gingham shirt, with wristbands tight as the
skin;
And ninety-eight-cent overalls that seem desirous
to hide
Inside the red rubber boots that reach scarce half
to the knee:
As simple he seems in construction
As his old pine-bottom punt.
He speaks in a shrill, strident accent,
That proves over anxious to babble:

ON THE DES MOINES

"Wrong side of the stream; the current is yonder."

I thank him.

"I'll take you across; I'm going to run my set-lines."

The squeak of the oar as he pulls,

Reminds me much of Charon.

I invite myself to remain while he visits his set-line.

"Ever catch many fish?" I venture.

"Catch many? should say that I do!

Last spring I flooded the markets.

Kept losing a good many hooks,

Finally fastened them on with wire,

Next morning I had six pike that weighed sixty-seven pounds.

Seventeenth day of last May as I was rowing

Saw something there in the grass like a log,

Finally saw 'twas a monstrous pickerel.

Went back and got my pole,

And fastened a half-pound chub,

And tried every way to entice him,

But he never swerved an inch.

Thinks I, I'll fool you, young fellow;

So I took off my minnow, and fastened the largest hook

I could find in my boat with number eight wire,

Dropped it carefully under his jay,

And yanked with all my might.

The splash in the water drenched me,

And the wire snapped like whipcord;

But the water there was so shallow,

ON THE DES MOINES

He got stranded among the rushes,
And I waded in, and carried him out in my arms.
How much do you think he weighed?
Thirty-seven pounds and three-quarters.
Last fall when the water went down,
Big fish were so thick it seemed a shame to catch
them.
Anywhere along the shore where you found a log or
stump,
You could pull them out with your hands.
Strange thing, they liked to be petted;
All you had to do was to find one,
Rub him carefully down the side
Till you fixed your thumb in his gills;
Then, if you had the muscle, the rest was perfectly
simple.
Thirtieth day of last August,
Bud, my oldest boy, who's just turning twelve,
Crawled into an old hollow log,
Suddenly got his fist in one's mouth;
Fish naturally got scared, swallowed the arm to the
shoulder,
And charged, with Bud, down the river.
If I hadn't been there with this boat,
Boy certainly would have been drowned;
As it was, the fish broke his arm.
Many's the time I have seen them carried away from
the river,
On a handspike, over men's shoulders,

ON THE DES MOINES

Their tails a-dragging the ground."
The squeak of the weathered oar ceases;
My fisherman thrusts under water,
Lifts the end of his set-line over the nose of the punt,
And begins to examine his hooks with the tenderness
of a woman.
"Must be a big one on, by way I feel him jerking."
With the very next hook, he drags in a nine-ounce
catfish,
Pulls a rusty spring scale from his pocket:
"Not so bad as I thought; weighs four pounds seven
ounces."
Thrusts it into a burlap bag; takes hold of the line
again.
"No, that wasn't the one I felt;
There's a bigger one yet to come."
With this, he hauls in a turtle.
"My, what an enormous leatherback; somebody's go-
ing to have soup."
Its kicking legs hang from the scale:
"Scale ain't big enough; only registers fifty pound;
Turtle must weigh well-nigh ninety."
After carefully admiring him,
He ties him to a nail in the nose of his punt.
"There's still another one jerking."
This time—if his scale doesn't lie—
'Tis a five-pound catfish he lands.
And when at last he has finished taking his toll from
the river,

ON THE DES MOINES

Two more squirming leatherbacks are clawing the
nose of the boat.

"What you do besides fishing?" I query,

As he sets me down where the current

Caresses the bend in the shore.

"Stoke the furnace all night at the Power Plant.

Don't know what I should do,

If I couldn't get down to the river every morning of
my life.

All night long, as I singe my nose in the fire-box,

I dream of my pike and my pickerel;

I wonder what fish on the morrow

Will be waiting me on my set-line;

And when I come out with the daylight,

After blistering away all the night,

It makes me feel happy all over,

Makes me glad to be alive.

Sleep? I dream afternoons

Of the fish I feel on my set-line

That slip off before I get them;

And sometimes I fuss over turtles,

Especially on days when I catch them three or four
at a time,

But I must be going along;

The Missus is waiting to see what I'll fetch for our
dinner."

The squeaky boat breasts the current;

Comes a voice from across the river,

"How's fishing this morning, Pete?"

ON THE DES MOINES

"Fine!" the strident voice answers,
"Four five-pound catfish,
And a half dozen leatherbacks bigger than water-
tubs."

Reluctantly I leave him,
This naive dreamer of fishes,
This overgrown child of the river,
This one of the least of my brethren
Of the guild of good fishermen.

XVIII

MY SWEDE FARMER

Fishing in the depths of a pool for catfish.
Comes a Swede and his twelve-year son.
"You catch any fish?" he queries.
I tell him to lift my stringer.
He stares in blank bewilderment, the boy with wild
excitement.
"Got any more hooks and sinkers?
I bring plenty along, but I lose them all in the river.
See many big fish, but they no bite me today."
I explain they are carp and buffalo,
That they bite only sweetcorn and wheat-dough.
"You mean they don't eat; I never hear that before."
I give him hooks and sinkers and plenty of bait;
I tell him to take off his bobber, and show him where
to cast.
The boy still has his last hook;
This I keep as a souvenir, it is quite too large for
whale.
I explain to my Swede just how to make a catch.
He thanks me in broken English, goes on to tell me
his story:
"You see I not much fisherman;
I buy me big farm; we work like the devil;
Boy crazy to come to the river.

ON THE DES MOINES

I promise him corn plowing finished I take him half
a day;
For three month he work like a demon;
Yesterday, corn plowing finished."
I look at the toil-weary stripling,
At the stubby, heavy pole, at the faded gleam in his
eye;
I look at the gnarled, calloused fingers,
At the closely knit frame of the man,
At the stolid perseverance of their slowly moving
race,
And know they have worked like the devil.
Comes a school of carp and buffalo along the water's
surface:
My Swede looks greedily on, and spits intolerably
often.
And when I look at the boy, his eyes are the size of
saucers.
Comes a catfish bite, but my Swede is too slow.
"Pull quicker and harder," I urge, as he baits afresh.
Give my pole a lusty jerk, and land me a catfish.
"Let me borrow your stringer," I add,
"And I'll catch you a mess of fish."
But my Swede scarce understands me;
He is greedily devouring an overgrown buffalo
That is sucking the foam from the water.
Again comes a bite: his quickest jerk is too slow.
Again I land a catfish.

ON THE DES MOINES

Soon he forgets my directions, lifts his bait to the
surface,
And coaxes the buffalo to bite;
And I go on filling his stringer.
The lad feels a bite, jerks nervously his pole,
Gouges a carp through the tail, and clumsily draws it
ashore.
"Pretty good! Ever catch many fish?" I encourage.
"My first!" This with boyish pride.
My Swede feels a bit chagrined that the lad has
beaten him,
Frowns a rather severe reproof;
Forgets his own hook till his bait touches the bottom.
This time he jerks quicker and harder,
Snags his buffalo under the jaw, drags him greedily
to land.
The clumsy fish stolidly struggles,
In all the world like a slow-moving, slow-thinking
Swede.
"This, I t'ink, with the ones you have caught,
Make us pretty good mess, guess we better be going
home;
The cows are to milk, and tomorrow we start the al-
falfa."
I watch the hope fade from the boyish blue eyes,
And the dull look of toil settle over his face,
As the father commands, "Louie, pull in that pole!"
The lad nervously jerks, in obedience;
At that instant a catfish has bitten,

ON THE DES MOINES

And he lands it safe with a splash.
This revives him somewhat at starting;
He shoulders his heavy pole,
And his father greedily stares at the stringer.
While they clamber up the steep bank, I hear the
 father
Drive a hard bargain with the credulous youth:
"Next summer, you work as hard, Louie, we maybe
 come back a-fishing."
With a start, the lad's back straightens,
And a year adds itself to his stature.

XIX

MY SCIENTIFIC FARMER

After a hearty meal of bass,
By the running water with my Socrates and my fish-
ing pole.

Comes a young farmer with a pail of creek minnows.
I offer half the fish I catch for a share of the bait.
Soon we are walking down stream working our min-
nows before us.

I sound my man on various subjects; he proves a
mere clam.

I mention Scientific Agriculture:

His small fiery eyes glow, his cheeks and mouth
tighten;

At last, I have found where he dwells.

"Oh yes, Scientific Agriculture is the solution
Of the Country Life Problem."

"How so?" I give him line.

"It puts everything on an efficiency basis;

At the end of the year the farmer knows his exact
profit

From each hog, cow, chicken, from each acre of each
crop.

It makes of him a man of means;

He builds a modern silo, and buys himself an auto-
mobile;

ON THE DES MOINES

He is within as easy reach of the movies and the market

As his neighbor in town."

"In other words, the new Reign of Industrialism
Makes your farmer the stomach of society."

My farmer is confused; I become more explicit:

"Scientific Agriculture is merely the solution
Of the City Board of Trade for cheap vegetables and
meat.

Let the price of food advance, and forthwith
Your city merchant launches afresh the Country Life
Movement.

Among the industrial leaders,
Scientific Agriculture is merely a matter of the
gullet."

"But even so, the farmer reaps the entire benefit."

"For the farmer it is even more a problem of the
stomach;

Whereas, once he fed on skimmed milk, now he fat-
tens on cream.

What he needs to understand is

That while science may give him the means to a
fuller life,

It in no way gives him the method for its attain-
ment."

"You are too deep for me," my farmer complains.

"You will agree that man has a brain and a person-
ality,

A hunger for knowledge and a hunger for happiness,

ON THE DES MOINES

In addition to an appetite for a hearty meal?"

"Sure!"

"How does your Scientific Agriculture satisfy these?"

"It gives the farmer money, the mechanical conveniences of life,

All the pleasures that can be bought, leisure to enjoy these."

"It does not teach him to judge between the good and the bad;

It fails to develop his capacity to enjoy the best;

It makes him dependent upon vulgar commercial amusements;

He lacks the ability to make himself independent of the town;

He knows about raising hogs and corn,

He is ignorant about rearing boys and girls—

Your Scientific Agriculture gives your farmer a full stomach,

But leaves him with an empty mind and an undeveloped personality!"

"Again you are beyond my depth."

"Well then, let me tell you a story:

I knew a farmer once, and he managed eighty acres of land.

To begin, he had a college education;

He learned to love the best in books, in art, and in music.

He had an exceptional personality; his friends advised him

ON THE DES MOINES

To go to the city, and make a career for himself;
But the fields and the woods where he had been
reared

Were more dear to him.

By working hard, he mastered soil fertility, rotation
of crops,

Testing of seed corn, and the feeding and judging of
live stock.

He loved his animals so much that he gave them in-
dividual names,

And each came to his call;

He was never happier than when one of them
Drew the blue ribbon at the county or the state fair.
By careful management, he worked forty-five hours
per week.

His leisure, he spent in self-improvement;

Within his house,

He had the best books, the best music, the best art,
That money could buy.

About his estate, he planted many rare shrubs and
flowers.

When his day's work was finished,

He went into the fields and the woods, and communed
with Nature;

Or he went into his library and communed with man-
kind;

Or he took his book and his fishing-pole and com-
muned with the river.

Strangely enough, he never felt the need

ON THE DES MOINES

Of the sensational amusements of the town;
The love of the movies, he believed, the mark of a
childish mind.

His children, he reared to love the things of the
farm;

They developed a feeling for the out-of-doors,
A joy in all animal and vegetable life,
And an appreciation of the best in literature and art.
This man often met with his neighbors,
And talked with them about the problems of human
life;

He organized them and their children into a society
Where problems of life in the country
As well as problems of Scientific Farming were dis-
cussed.

He often talked with them of the joys of living in
the country.

Later, without his solicitation,
His friends elected him to the Legislature and then
to Congress;

And finally, he was appointed to the President's Cab-
inet

To advise the farmers of the Nation.

And when he was through with it all,
He came back home to live and to die in the country.
In addition to Scientific Agriculture, this man knew
human life,

And appreciated the best it had to give;
Besides knowing hogs and corn, he knew humanity;

ON THE DES MOINES

Besides filling his stomach,
He filled his mind with great thoughts,
And his soul with the refined feelings of art;
He was both a farmer and a citizen."
"Now I think I understand you, and in most part,
agree with you;
Only, the standard you set is very high;
But I will think on it,
Perhaps I may yet become a township supervisor."
As the fish are not biting, we walk a long way in silence,
Before we catch sufficient for our dinner.
When we part, each feels
He has not entirely wasted the morning.

XX

MY CAPTAIN FISHERMAN

For many mornings together,
Without even missing a Sunday,
Through all sorts of wind and weather,
From a distance,
I have studied an elderly fisherman
As he sits in his silent cove under the generous elms.
His quiet, unhurried movements,
His patience, his skillful castings,
Have made me hope against hope,
Some happy morning or other,
He will fasten himself at my elbow.
But at last, after unwearied praying,
Mohammed is forced to the mountain.
Scarcely dawn has flung through the sky
The golden wine of the morning,
When I betake myself to the silent cove neath the
 elms;
But even then, the old man is there before me.
"You are early," he greets.
"I seem to be late."
"The fishes were here long before us,
And will be here as long after."
"You seem to be ever here."
"All the fishes, I learn from experience,
At one time or another, find their way to my cove.

ON THE DES MOINES

All things come to him who has courage and patience
to wait,
And skill to take what is offered."
His ruddy face, as he speaks, glows with a weathered
vigor;
The wells of his eyes are as deep as the unclouded
heavens,
And as serene and untroubled.
"Your roving fishermen, that move up and down the
channel,
Searching ever to find the most favored pool of the
river,
Remind me again and again of the ludicrous world of
men
In their restless unceasing endeavor to outstrip their
brother men.
They all feel the barb at last
As their uncontrolled fate overtakes them.
Some days, they may have better luck;
But when the season is ended, I also have taken my
portion.
Some fish only for bass, and some fish only for pick-
erel,
And some fish only for pike and some fish only for
catfish,
Only a few fish for carp;
But I take whatever is offered;
The good wife has skill to prepare each kind to my
palate;

ON THE DES MOINES

And what remains after our need, we sell.
We find frugal comfort at home, and perfect concord
abroad.

We strive with none; we envy no man his money,
We covet no man his greed, we love our simple fare.
Whenever the barb may fasten us, it will find us not
unready.

No; I was not always thus minded; once I was young
and ambitious,

Climbed after fame with the bravest;
I was one who with Grant hounded Lee to the end,
Saw him hand in his sword to the conquering host;
I rose from private to captain,
Lost my health in the conflict, was plucked from the
lists,

Was game as a bass to the end.
I read in the lines of your forehead
In the premature gray of your temples,
That you, too, have striven with fate
And are living content by the river.
For forty years I have angled;
And still, as I study the fishes,
To find me the baits for each morning
Best suited the season and weather,
I laugh at the profits of merchants,
I laugh at the new reign of commerce,
I smile at the empty materialism,
I study the toiling and striving,
The snarling, the bickering, the killing,

ON THE DES MOINES

Of my brothermen the world over.
I thank the good God for my wife and her love,
For our modest house here by the river,
For my cove underneath the elms,
For the quiet content that is born of honest angling."
During the time he has discoursed,
I forgot altogether my fishing;
I feel as one feels when all unexpected he finds
The end of his strivings and searchings.
The balanced pole of the master
Swings with unstudied skill;
His eyes see all the life that surges and seethes under
water;
He knows every nibble and bite,
Wastes never a bait nor an uncertain jerk at the line;
The fishes come gladly to greet him, what he wants
he catches;
And when he has finished his stringer is filled.
"You have made a good catch."
"Not uncommon," he smiles as he leaves me.
"Many say that my cove is enchanted;
Many sit as you've sat without fishing;
Many fish when I've gone without making a single
catch;
Mostly they leave this small cove unruffled to me
alone."
Uncovered I stand while he tugs up the bank;
And when I have watched till he vanishes,
I turn to the cove without fishing.

XXI

MY EDITOR

Comes a lean, lantern-jawed individual,
With a gingery felt hat and a haughty, upturned ,
cigar;
His brow has the slant of a poet.
He sits as he baits his hook, and begins in a talkative
manner:
"My readers at this time of season, expect a good
fishing story;
So regularly once a year I come for a day at the river,
To interview fishermen.
Yes, I edit the Weekly Tribune; about two thousand
subscribers;
Sell more advertising than all other sheets in the
county combined.
How do I manage my readers?
The farmers I feed each week on a page of boiler
plate,
And a column of locals from each R. F. D. postman.
My townsmen I constantly please by running flatter-
ing locals,
And often by giving each store a business writeup;
Oh yes, and I run editorials regularly once a month,
On the evils of mail order houses—especially Sears
and Roebuck.

ON THE DES MOINES

The local business men write most of these themselves;

But I run them as editorials.

No, I don't believe much in scandal;

That sort of thing is all right for city sheets to publish,

It brings them circulation;

But scandal breeds enmity; and the main thing, I find,

In a village, is to please everybody concerned;

A friend is a business asset.

Of course, if some worthless cuss, who can't any way affect business.

Does something that isn't too bad,

I righteously rise and scathe him with a blacksnake of rawhide.

Yes, I believe in the gospel of punch;

Got to keep things moving; at least, make it seem they are moving.

Constantly, I make it my business to boost everything in town.

Occasionally, what I write finds its way into the exchanges,

Gives the town good advertising.

What about telling the truth? Truth is so flexible;

Looked at with one eye, a thing is a fact;

With the other, it's perfectly legitimate to color the news.

A newspaper belongs to the public;

ON THE DES MOINES

And everybody knows that boosting brings business;
I give people what they want, and everyone likes to
be boosted.

What about ideals? My ideal is service:

Whoever brings twice as much business, contributes
as much

As he who doubles the grass blades on a given acre-
age of land.

What about politics? My policy again is service:

I discover public opinion;

Find the candidate that will favor local interests;

And having found him boost him.

And religion? My policy ever is service.

It's good business to advertise the morals of a town;

Country mothers aren't so restless

About their children Saturday nights;

And so I encourage the churches."

I thank my editor kindly for his interview.

"My gracious, I hadn't thought—why I came to in-
terview you—

You must be somebody, somewhere."

"I'm simply the voice of the river."

"And what is your business?"

"To interview fishermen, chiefly."

"You fish yourself, I believe; helped the parson catch
his bass?"

"No, he landed it himself; my fishing's entirely neg-
ligible."

"Heard any good fish stories lately?"

ON THE DES MOINES

"None that are worth repeating; if you'll find the man

Who belongs to that old pine punt,
He can spin you a tale worth the telling."

"You mean old Pete Thompson?

I've heard his lies times over; none of them worth a damn."

"You know the man in the cove neath the elms, yonder?"

"Old High Anderson, yes, known him for twenty years;

Worthless sort of a cuss, doesn't even subscribe for my paper."

"He'd make you capital copy."

"I prefer very much the story of some prominent resident;

Good business to boost somebody who boosts your town."

"Why don't you interview some prominent fish or other?

Make you a splendid story to tell about yourself;
I've minnows here in my pail, and there's the bass rock yonder.

Nose about for a spell without even casting a shadow,
Likely as not the river will send you its most noted citizen

To spin you a corking yarn."

"By golly, I'll do it!" He lights another cigar.

ON THE DES MOINES

"Don't make too much smoke or noise," I laugh as I
fasten the minnow.

An hour later when I pass the bass rock,

My editor still is perspiring.

His pad lies across his knee;

His pole is battered and twisted, and his line in a
terrible snarl.

"I hooked him right enough, and he shouted a cork-
ing story."

"I think your copy will please," I smile as I tug at
my stringer.

"Yes, the story he told me is about our most promi-
nent citizen,

The mayor."

XXII

MY POET

With my Walton and my pole by the side of the singing river.

Comes a man slowly pacing the shore:

His face is sad, his eyes are turned inward, he does not see me.

I call to him; he stops, panic-stricken,

As though caught in some unholy act, rights his outward visage,

Approaches smiling, speaks in a musical accent:

"You are reading?"

"Yes, alternating pages from the river and from my Walton;

Studying to be quiet; but you are carrying a book, too."

"A volume of my poems."

"You write on hogs and corn?" I smile.

"I should be more successful if I did;

My work has fallen on deaf ears; the world is blind to beauty,

It is utterly obsessed with material things:

Corn and hogs in Iowa, wheat in the Northwest,

Steel and leather in the East, cotton in the South,

Stocks and bonds in New York—

Everywhere greed, and sensationalism its closest of kin."

ON THE DES MOINES

"But our hearts are unsullied,"
I encourage, half in despair of my poet.
"Yes, but we are wounded, there are none to cheer us;
Instead of sympathy we receive derision."
"Some say the clam heals each its bruises with a pearl.
Your poets have succeeded because the inhospitable
climate
Has sent you to look at the river and the stars;
It has held you aloof the maelstrom of the active
world;
It has given you time to explore the unfathomed
mystery
Which is within you;
It has made of you the leaders of the race."
"But in our time things are much worse than formerly;
The Reign of Science has made of men machines;
It measures action, enthrones efficiency,
And leaves the inner mind to atrophy.
We later poets fall on a hard world;
The corn has all been picked;
We labor hard to find a single ear unharvested."
"What of your second volume?"
His eyes dilate visibly, his breath comes in gasps:
"It is in the making; it is much better than this first
effort.
My whole life is going into it.
I come to the river now and then
To read it within the hearing of the ripples;

ON THE DES MOINES

It impresses me wonderfully at times,
And then again it seems like river water after a
freshet."

"Do you ever listen to hear the verdict of the river?"

"I had never thought to do that."

"Bring your fishing pole next time;

It will give you the excuse to sit long hours uninter-
rupted.

I should not be surprised the river would give you
the poem

That would make you famous, would you allow it the
time.

No one in Iowa has harvested the running water.—
But I must try my luck at fishing."

I lift my pole and bait my hook.

"And I must try my verses by the lipping ripples."

"When you have learned to fish, and have written
what the river whispers,

I should like to hear your verses."

As he starts on, I hear him mumble: "Giver, liver,
quiver, river."

I despair; he should have the patience to wait long
Before beginning his rhymes.

XXIII

MY CAPTAIN FISHERMAN'S
SWEETHEART

Another Sunday morning by the river.
Comes an elderly woman down to the shore,
Her automobile bonnet in hand, her duster across her
arm.

She is lisping a snatch from an old love song;
Her eyes are flooded with the wild elixir of youth.
She utters a slight exclamation at sight of me;
Her features fill with the burdens of age.
"I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I must talk to some-
body."

I gladly lend her mine ear.

"Are you a native here?"

"Yes—of the river."

"Then you can perhaps tell me;

Does Captain Anderson still fish on the banks of this
stream?"

"High Anderson, you mean?"

"I believe he sometimes goes by that name."

"There he sits in his cove under the elms."

She lifts a pair of opera glasses to her eyes:

"My sight isn't so good as it used to be."

A finely embroidered handkerchief goes to each eye;

The mouth quivers noticeably;

She looks again—this time for a long minute:

ON THE DES MOINES

"I should think he must be growing very old."

"He is still in the best of health, I assure you;

The river gives him of its strength,

It keeps him forever young in spirit;

And what is better still, at peace with his fellowmen.,

And with his own soul."

"How like him to make the best of everything."

"He is the rarest good fisherman

It has been my privilege to meet."

"He always did everything he tried better than everybody else."

"You knew him in his younger days, when he was climbing to fame,

When he was rising to the command of his company."

"How did you guess?"

"I knew it all the while."

"Then he told you?"

"No, you did—by your manner."

She looks foolish until a smile comes to lighten her features.

"And his wife?" She tries overmuch to appear unconcerned.

"She died very suddenly, the week before last; heart failure."

"And he still fishes?"

"He missed but a single day."

It is my turn to question.

"Who may you be?"

"I used to be a girl here on the prairie by the river.

ON THE DES MOINES

That cove under the elms was part of my father's
farm;

It was always my favorite haunt.

My father was a pioneer in Iowa;

We 'knew all the deprivations of a prairie winter;

Fifteen miles down the river stood the nearest store;

Yóu wouldn't believe I've been through that sort of
thing;

Now I'm worth a hundred thousand dollars.

I haven't been back for ten years;

Came twenty miles out of my way just for a glimpse
of the place.

I often wonder

If I wouldn't have been far happier had I spent my
life here;

Still one never knows; life is so queer and selfish.

May I ask you to do me a favor?"

"Certainly, if it is within my power."

She fumbles a long time at her bosom:

"Then deliver this to the Captain.

I shall wait here until you have placed it in his hand;

Tell him the woman who sends it is waiting to wave
him farewell.

She has the feeling next time she comes this way

She will be brought for burial.

Hasten!

My chauffeur will be angry for a month if I keep him
waiting."

I carry the message

ON THE DES MOINES

Around the sharp bend in the bank to the cove.
My Captain is sitting, a far-away dream in his eye;
The woman has her glasses on us.
A locket, set with a beautiful pearl, falls into his
hand;
The daguerreotypes
Of an earnest young private and of a handsome young
captain
Face him.
"There she stands," I point.
He looks;
There is the flutter of the filmy handkerchief above
her head.
My man arises, brings his hand to his hat brim,
In a perfect officer's salute,
Brushes the mist from before his eyes.
When he looks again, she has vanished.
Then he turns upon me: "How say you she was old?
I saw a girl of nineteen—the one I left behind when
I enlisted:
It must have been her daughter sent it to me."
I assure him as best I can; finally he smiles:
"It must be I'm getting old;
My eyesight isn't as keen as it used to be.
Did she have a dimple?"
"Yes, on the left cheek,
And a very slight scar across the right temple."
My Captain is satisfied.
"Did she seem happy?"

—

ON THE DES MOINES

I evade him; he does not press me for an answer.

He blows his nose vociferously:

"She was foolish; she married the wrong man.

He had the money; she was young and inexperienced;

She didn't know

What a very little part of life can be bought with
gold.

I am sorry for her:

Still, one should not want to change destiny;

Life should teach one to be a good fisherman,

To obey his superior officer,

Without question or doubt, to be content with his
catch."

I leave him almost immediately; four or five times I
look back.

Always he is putting the locket in his left vest poc-
ket,

Or else holding it to his lips.

When he passes me on his way to dinner,

His stringer is much lighter than usual.

XXIV

MY GOOD WIFE

Walking by the river meditating.
I discover a woman
Sitting at a picturesque point of the shore overlooking the water.
She is meditating her Browning.
Her face tells me she has suffered intensely;
Her gnarled fingers, that she has unflinchingly borne
Her share of the world's burden.
I greet her cheerily;
She lifts her face with the look of utter resignation.
"You evidently enjoy your Browning."
"Aside from my Jesus, I enjoy him most of the world's masters.
He teaches me to welcome discontent,
To be ever dissatisfied with my own imperfect accomplishment;
With him, I have learned to disregard the frivolous, fleeting moment,
To make each day contribute its share
To the eternal life of my growing soul."
"You feel this philosophy
Lifts you above the petty drudgery of life?"
"Yes, I feel I am incorporating in my own personality
The same qualities, the same basis of judgment,

ON THE DES MOINES

That are found in the eternal mind behind the changing universe.

I have learned to think of the world
Merely as a training school for character."

"But how came you to find the companionship
Of the great teachers of the earth?"

"Mine is a strange story:

I was born and reared in Chicago;
My father was a well-to-do merchant,
My younger sister and I were sent to college.
I fell in love with a brilliant young buyer
For the woman's dress goods department of Marshall
Fields;

My father disapproved,
Disinherited me for disobeying his wishes;
Soon I awoke to find my husband a drunkard.
Oh no, he never became intoxicated in my presence;
Periodically, he would leave me for two weeks at a
time;

When he came back he was always a nervous wreck.
At first, he tried to make me believe
He had been sent to New York on business.
Bad led to worse, he lost his position.
His father had left him a farm here on the banks of
the river;

I brought him to the country in the hope that he
would reform.

Oh no, I was not angry with him; I loved him, he
loved me.

ON THE DES MOINES

He had inherited his weakness;
When the passion was not on him, we were happy.
He tried every sort of remedy:—
The treatment of the local physicians,
The theory of gradually tapering off, the Keeley Cure;
But his weakness was constitutional.
When the crops or the stock were marketed, or the
weather bad,
He would leave me and the girls.
When he came home, he would promise never to
leave us again.
No, I did not lecture him;
I planted a beautiful flower garden, and made a home
for him.
But I knew when the spell came upon him, he would
go again.
Strangest thing of all, two years ago last winter,
He tried religion, and it cured him.
No, I am not a church member;
But I was glad he should try anything that might
help him.
He came home from church one night, overflowing
with joy.
'I've linked my arm with the Almighty; I've got the
power!'
He shouted; and sure enough he had.
He tried to make up to me and his daughters our
wasted happiness;
He did everything a wrecked physical being could do.

ON THE DES MOINES

Yes, he died last spring at the plow handles
Between the corn rows; paralysis.
Do you wonder I have needed some sort of philosophy
To keep my life from despair?
In my living room stands a little colonial writing
desk;
These elbows have worn the varnish on either side.
Every day, for many years,
I have had my secret hour there with my great teacher.
In summer, I like to come here;
Something about the river is eternal:
The flowing, changing waters fret the same banks
Century after century; yet, the river is the same."
"It is so with the great philosophies of life:
Jesus and Socrates are the banks;
Between these, through the ages,
All the lesser teachers fret and stammer, and disappear;
Their fitful, ephemeral words dislodge a grain of sand
here
And a rock yonder, but the banks remain;
Browning but interprets their idealism to an age of
materialism."
"Oh no, I am not unhappy; had not trouble come into
my life,
I might have grown a mere gaudy butterfly,
Sipping the perfumed flowers of society;
I might have neglected

ON THE DES MOINES

The one opportunity of this, my earthly existence,
To fashion my personality for its eternal dwelling-
place,
For its continually enlarging environment."
Finally, I leave her to her Browning and her river,
Feeling as one feels
Who unawares has stood in the presence of an angel.

XXV

MY HEALER

As I thread the shore diligently casting for pickerel,
Comes a fisherman noiselessly wading a-down the
stream.

He is dressed cap-a-pie:

His coat and hat are of khaki, his shirt of brown flannel,

His gauntlet gloves of oiled leather, his hip boots of
red rubber.

A minnow float and a stringer dangle along at his
heels.

I stand and admire, as he flings his long silken line
Afar o'er the water, and as carefully reels it in,
With a constant eye to the float as it drifts in long
silent circles.

And when comes a tug at the bait,
How certain he is in each movement,
Till the fish falls afoul his stringer.

And when he greets me in passing,
I see in the grizzled Vandyke and the glint of the
piercing gray eye,

A person of uncommon merit.

At the moment, it falls my good fortune
To barb and to land a fine fish in no unsportsman-
like manner.

"Who taught you to catch such fine pickerel?"

ON THE DES MOINES

I tell him I read my Socrates of Alopece,
My Jesus of Nazareth, and my Sir Izaak Walton,
And heed the local good fishermen.
His steady glance cuts to my heart: "And live?"
"Ever down by the river."
Without more ado, he reclines on the sand,
Sends his minnow afloat through the reeds.
I cast a fresh frog, and sit at his side,
And talk of the baits and the fishes,
Of the places and times best for angling,
Of the myriad ways of the river:
Whence it comes, whence it flows, how it ripples and
curves,
How it loiters through pools, how it sings over sands,
Wanders far from its course, mothers the lives that it
holds,
Of its every mood fitting the mood of a man,
Of its mystery so like unto life.
Then he smooths out his voice to the lap of the ripple,
And discourses his story as he works his live minnow;
I silently study his manner.
"I came from the city to live on the bank of the river.
At the time, I had risen through twelve maddening
years
To a place of renown as a surgeon.
Each morning I held a free clinic,
The hospital crowded with patients;
Each afternoon ordered my practice,

ON THE DES MOINES

And collected large fees from the wealthy;
Each night fought for social prestige:
Made a striking success of it all.
Paid the price, the price of the city, to its mad killing pace.
One day as I opened the pelvis
To cut out the atrophied organs of a broken-down patient —
Although 'twas reported the ether,
'Twas the swerve of the knife that brought death.
I awoke from my orgy of energy, from my pride in efficiency,
To the knowledge of shattered nerves.
I quietly closed my accounts,
Took leave of my friends, to rusticate here by the river.
I gradually cast my wines and tobacco adrift,
Went to bed in the evening, took the air in the morning,
Ate plain, simple diet, read good books and fished.
How wonderful is the river;
Its healing a good medicine, its soothing a mother's lullaby;
It giveth life to all who are weary;
A good Samaritan, unto the bruised and the shattered and the maimed.
Gradually my nerves became normal;
My friends and the lure of the city invited afresh;
But I loved so my life by the river,

ON THE DES MOINES

I built a hospital topping the curve in the channel.
My patients come to me here; I charge a small fee,
I keep my own counsel, and come every morning a-fishing.

I advise them often to follow;
But mostly they tangle their lines, feed the sunfish
and bullheads.

They flatter and rave, fall in ecstasies over its beauty.
The while the stream flows as serenely,

And will sing on as sweetly forever,

Regardless of whether they chatter.

And when they are strong,

They go bustling back, try the pace set to kill,

Tell their friends of the healer who keeps open house
by the river.

But I must be loitering along.

Five await after dinner my knife, and as many again
on the morrow.

I feel no worry or hurry;

My pole teaches patience and skill, and a steady nerve
in the handling.

I will meet you again on the morrow; next time we
will discourse on Walton."

I watch the steady tread as he silently slips down the
river,

I see the long graceful line fly afar o'er the shimmering water,

I watch the float disappear, see the fish safely placed
on the stringer.

ON THE DES MOINES

And when he is gone, I feel that Nature has opened
her cruse,
And has laved me all over with healing.

XXVI

I GO BACK TO MY WORK

This day I am up before the sun;
On the morrow I go back to the world.
The first reverent voice of the robin
Tells me the birth of the morning is to him the
miracle of creation;
It is so to me.
My thoughts are chastened; they fly upward on the
wings of light;
Each moment carries a fresh message to me from the
Eternal Spirit.
Today I am a child; I continue to cast pebbles into
the water;
I watch the encircling waves flow oceanward;
I converse with the river.
It tells me of the long, tortuous channel leading down
to the sea,
Of the many boulders to be passed, of the many
wheels to be turned,
Of the continual demands made upon its life,
Of the refuse constantly poured into it by the hands
of man,
Of the endless struggle against stagnation:
I look inward, and see it has been telling me of my-
self.
I loiter to the cove underneath the elms;

ON THE DES MOINES

I sit a long time with my Captain fisherman;
The pearl in the locket, he tells me,
His own boyish hands plucked from an unpromising
clam.

His greatest care, at present,
Is to acquire the skill his wife used, in flavoring his
fish.

He comforts me; he will send me a part of his catch
occasionally;

He will be waiting in his cove against my return an-
other season.

I take my leave of him.

I hear the squeak of the pine punt;

Pete tells me he has just taken

A fourteen-pound six-ounce catfish from his set-line;

It is safely cased in burlap bag from curious eyes.

I go on to visit the places dear to me.

My healer entices me to dinner with a large pike.

He bids me beware the pace that kills.

I promise him to cast my ambition to the fishes,

To earn an honest living, without neglecting my life,

To take much time to be quiet.

The while his patients await his knife,

He discourses long upon the healing

Spread by Nature upon the river of running water.

Through the afternoon I am much alone;

I visit the various places where I have been wont to
fish;

ON THE DES MOINES

I review the lives of those whose elbows I have
rubbed;
I think many thoughts too sacred for the printed
page.
I am filled with an unspeakable wonder;
A voice deep within me persuades me
That no evil, either in life or in death, may befall an
honest man.
I pass by my good wife and her Browning;
Some day long hence,
We may possibly walk a mile through the Garden of
Proserpine,
And discourse on the enlarging environment of the
soul.
I come upon my cranberry fisherman;
His rheumatism has doubled, the neuralgia in his ear
is roaring;
My loudest shout scarcely penetrates.
He has just caught two small catfish,
And feels—the Lord willing—
He will enjoy thirty years more of life.
I hear the ping of a rifle;
My old turtle hunter tells me he has just marked
The three thousand six hundred eighty-seventh cross;
His bitterness has in no way diminished.
For supper, I feed on the sunset;
My thoughts flow upward, and contemplate the In-
finite.
I strip me to the skin, I bathe me again in the river.

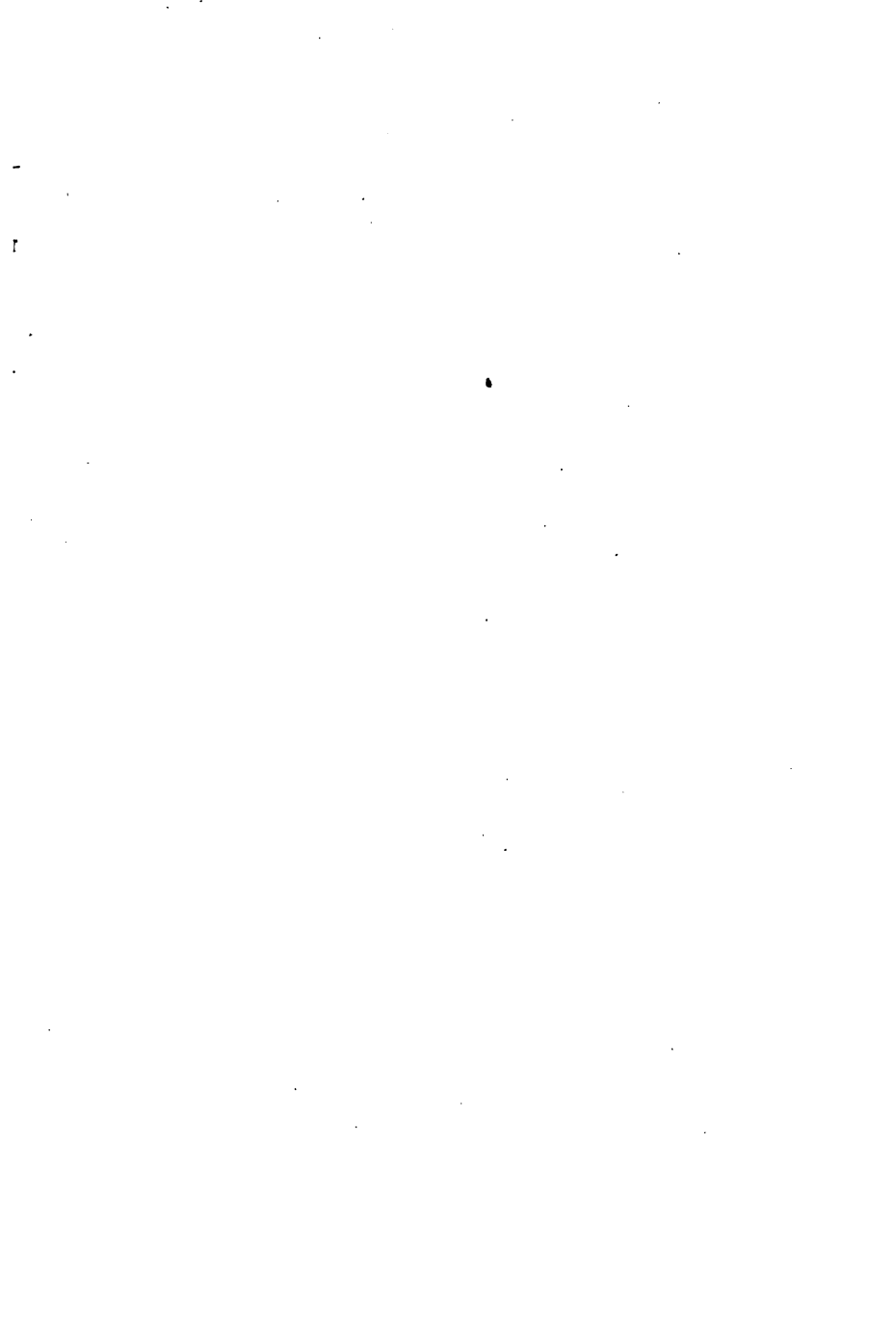
ON THE DES MOINES

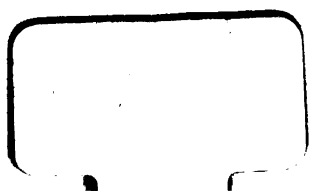
The eternal Spirit floods me
With an unspeakable yearning, and with a peace that
 passes my understanding.
The stars and the moon
Show me the woodland path to my camp at the
 water's edge.
I light my candle;
My books lie open before me:
My Walton was never happier,
He is smeared with hands fresh from the catching of
 fishes;
My Socrates is sown with thumb-marks of clam,
He does not rebuke me, I have not failed to search
In each shell I have opened for the perfect pearl;
A splatter of blood
Has fallen upon the page depicting the Crucifixion,
But my Jesus was ever partial to the untoward ways
 of fishermen.
A whiff of free air out of the night
Extinguishes my taper;
I stand uncovered,
With my eyes to the stars and my ears to the river;
An enlargement of soul is breathed into me.
The Great Spirit stands before me;
He directs me to become a deer-fly,
To sting my neighbors from their lethargy,
From their absorption in corn and hogs,
From their death of materialism.
To the needy and to the downtrodden,

ON THE DES MOINES

He bids me be a Good Samaritan.
Withal, he admonishes me to take much thought for
my own soul,
To study to be quiet.
I enter my lodge, I close my eyes in slumber,
There falls a breathing of sweet dreams upon my pillow.
On the morrow, I go back to the world.

THE END





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